

No Cause for Concern

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Collections:	Done , Fanfics I'd eat again at 3 am and already have , NCFC Universe , Sleepy bois fics that take up my tabs , self employed!! , Toads Top (absolute banger) Fics tm , dreamp smp vigilante aus , Dream SMP fics that butter my bread , SBI Fics for the soul , sipping cocoa and listening to mitski , favourite books ive read on here , Best Dream SMP Fanfics , heroes villains and vigilantes fic recommendations , minecraft fanfics that make my last braincell vibrate at the speed of light , Cross' Collection of DSMP/SBI fics (unfinished) , The best MCYT fics you've ever read , mcyt wip fics that... , RivsInprogressReading , Books I have consumed , The fanfics that had me lying awake at night like omg , Mcyt(mostly SBI) fics that I adore , My absolute favorites <3 , my cryfest <3 , Best Fics

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No Cause for Concern

by [hedgehoggeryyy](#)

Summary

So maybe applying for a job at the heroes' base of operations when he could be arrested any moment for being an illegal vigilante wasn't Tommy's smartest move. But he gets to work with his idols — Ghostbur, the Blade, and Philza Minecraft, Angel of Death himself, just to name a few — how could he turn down that opportunity, honestly?

And keeping his two identities separate can't be that difficult, really. It'll all be a piece of cake.

or, tommyinnit just wanted to pay the rent and save people at the same time. things can't go his way for just once, can they?

DISCONTINUED

An Interview, Innit?

Chapter Notes

hello!! and welcome all to my hyper fixation induced writing spree, brought about by reading too many superhero!au fics to name and desperately needing to write my own take on things (as a once-consumer of any and all marvel fics, i consider myself a professional in this area lmfao /j)

i have SO MUCH planned for this fic you would not believe, and i am super excited to write it all to life. i hope you all enjoy the ride, and are prepared for one hell of a hurt/comfort found family roller-coaster, because it is my specialty ;)

that said, don't expect any sort of updating schedule for this fic, my inspiration is chaotic and hits at odd times dksj

i don't think there's any tw for this chapter - there will be some descriptions of violence and that in the future, though, so be warned.

See the end of the chapter for more [notes](#)

"You are such an idiot."

Tommy rolled his eyes at his roommate's insults, all too tempted to simply hang up the call. Ranboo was generally great to live with; he was organised, a hard worker, calm where Tommy was chaotic and capable of whipping up a mean pasta dish. All that said, however, he was a worrywart. Really, Tommy didn't understand how he saw anything wrong with his plan.

"Am not," he responded lazily, gazing up at the skyscraper in front of him. Sunlight glared off the glass; it could have been glowing. "You said I needed a job, so I'm getting one."

Ranboo's tired sigh was scratchy over the phone. *"And of all the places, you thought the Watchtower was the best to go with?"*

The Watchtower was the shining heart of the city of L'Manberg, and the building that Tommy was currently standing outside of admiring. It was the base of operations for the many heroes

of the city, housing legends from Dream to Philza, the Angel of Death himself. It was also currently hiring.

"Um, yeah?" he shot back. "Ranboob, I could be working with the Blade — or even Philza Minecraft! Why wouldn't I apply?!"

"Because you could also end up working with Ghostbur — oh, yeah, forgot about the third member of SBI, did you? The one that arrests vigilantes?" Ranboo didn't sound impressed. In Tommy's defense, was he ever?

Tommy scoffed. "Yeah, well, he just wishes he were as cool as me."

"Tommy—"

"And besides, Ghostbur hasn't caught a vigilante in weeks!" That was... sort of a lie. Quackity had narrowly escaped capture from both Ghostbur and fellow hero Fundy, like, three days ago. But he had escaped, as he was able to recount the tale to Tommy himself. "It'll all be fine, big man, no worries."

"You're putting a lot on the line, Tommy," Ranboo said. *"Please just be careful."*

"Always am, Ranboob," Tommy joked back, but he knew his roommate was being serious. The two weeks Tommy had already gone unemployed had hurt them in more ways than one. In truth, Tommy wouldn't have applied at the Watchtower if he could have helped it; but as things were, Ranboo was struggling to pay the rent on his own, even considering the cutbacks they'd made on food. If Tommy got arrested, neither of them would have a home.

"Call me as soon as you get out, alright?"

"Will do."

Ranboo hesitated. *"And... good luck. I know I can't stop you."*

Tommy grinned. "Couldn't if you tried, big man. I'll call you back soon."

The teenagers made their hasty goodbyes before hanging up, tension lingering in the air. Tommy glanced at the time warily; he only had a few minutes before his interview.

Primes, things had been so much simpler two weeks ago.

Sure, their standard of living had probably never been ideal, but they'd always gotten by okay. It had been Tommy and Ranboo against the world for a few years now; they'd escaped the foster system together, rented their own apartment as soon as they were legally able. They both worked full-time during the summer months, took turns sharing the mattress on the floor, and even saved up enough to buy a little TV after a while. And maybe to most, that wasn't much, but it was the result of their hard work, and they were proud of it. It was home.

Of course, nothing in the mad city that was L'Manberg ever stayed the same for too long.

One day, you're working happily away at *Bad's Muffins & More* café; the next, you rock up to work only to find the building completely destroyed and a full police-and-hero investigation launched to find the culprit and also your missing boss.

Hence, after nearly a year with a stable job and friendly coworkers, Tommy found himself where he was today. It wasn't his fault, really.

"Likely an enhanced individual," the police report had eventually concluded. *"The damage appears to be power-caused. What kind, we're not yet sure."* Enhanced individuals were on the rise like never before, and with them came a plethora of problems. Wannabe supervillains, wannabe heroes who were bad at their job, the whole shebang. Vigilantes were, admittedly, one of them; it was far too easy for troubled young people to fall under the influence of the wrong individuals, and any power could be used to do real damage when twisted the right way.

All this was the reason for the power registry, and the total ban on power use with the exception of actual heroes. It was a system bound to self-implode eventually, Tommy mused. He and Ranboo were prime examples; two enhanced individuals who simply hadn't registered. They weren't allowed to use their powers anyway, so it wasn't like anyone was going to find out.

Well, until Tommy had, upon seeing the wreckage of his favourite workplace, decided to become a vigilante.

It wasn't his most well-thought-out decision, but thinking had never been his forte. "I'm going to become a vigilante," he had declared upon returning to the apartment that morning, where a sleepy Ranboo had nearly fallen out of their one chair in alarm. There was no talking him out of it once he had his mind set on the concept, and especially after his first patrol, there was no going back.

Because using his powers was *thrilling*.

It was a freedom he had never considered, but when he, for the first time in years, let the power flow through his veins and rush out into existence, he'd never felt better.

Tommy had known he was powerful; memories of playing around with his enhancement when he was a child, though biased by nostalgia, had remained for the most part accurate. Embracing his magic again at sixteen, however, was a completely different experience. His powers had only grown with him; he was stronger, and he hadn't even trained them yet.

Thank Primes for that strength, too, because stopping crime was a lot more difficult than it looked in the shows on TV. He would most certainly be dead if not for his magic, and as it was, he still took a beating regularly.

His first night on the job, dressed in a red hoodie and sweatpants, with a roughly-made face mask that covered his whole head, he'd returned home battered and bruised. Ranboo had freaked.

But he was getting better! Each time he went out, he pushed his powers a little more, tested their confines. He had stopped at least a dozen muggings by now, and stopped a few creepy men from dragging unsuspecting victims into alleyways, cars or the like. Unfortunately, it felt like as he got better, the criminals did too. Even today, he was still nursing a bruised arm, hidden under his long sleeves.

"Hello," he greeted the young receptionist on the ground floor with a charming smile. Fingers crossed, it hid his nerves well. He couldn't afford to fuck this up. "Um, I'm here for the interview for the assistant position?"

Hannah, as her name tag gave away, glanced up at him curiously from over her monitor. He supposed he was a sight to behold, really, a little rough around the edges from living in a tiny apartment, if not shockingly handsome.

"Tommy... er, Innit?" she inquired, after typing rapidly into her computer.

"That's me," he said, a weak laugh escaping in an attempt to soothe himself.

Hannah nodded. "Floor eighty-seven, second door on the left. Philza will be waiting up there for you."

Tommy's heart sank to his feet. *Philza?! As in the Angel of Death, Philza Minecraft?! For an interview?!* For once too shocked for words, he nodded stiffly and forced himself to move towards the elevator.

Sure, he had joked about getting to work with the top heroes, but he wasn't prepared in any way to actually, seriously meet any of them. What exactly had he applied for? Maybe he should have read the advertisement a bit more carefully.

The elevator ride to floor eighty-seven was horribly, dreadfully long. Tommy rocked back and forth on his feet as he watched the city sink beneath him out the window, trying to expel some of his nervous energy.

The doors were opening a little sooner than he expected, and he jumped in surprise - a quick glance to the buttons told him he was correct, that he had stopped at floor sixty-three. He nearly held his breath as the soft clip-clop of hooves on carpet announced the entrance of the elevator's newest occupant. Tommy watched her through his peripherals, staring resolutely ahead and focusing very hard on not dropping his jaw open in awe. That was *Captain Puffy* herself. Holy shit.

"Heya kiddo," the sheep hybrid greeted him casually, inputting her own destination.

Tommy felt frozen to the spot. He had to kick himself to respond. This was *amazing*. And *terrifying*. "Ayup."

The captain shot him a friendly smile, examining him curiously. "Any reason someone as young as yourself is headed to SBI's floor?"

Tommy nearly erupted. *He was going to SBI's floor?!*

"I — er," he stammered, words lost on him. Oh fuck, he really, really regretted not reading the job description all the way through. Fucking small print always got him. "Interview," he managed to spit out, and then took a comically large inhale, forcing his muscles to relax. "I'm — um — interviewing for an assistant position, with — er — Mr. Philza."

Captain Puffy snorted a laugh, and immediately raised a hand to cover her mouth, blushing red. "Sorry, that was rude of me," she admitted with a sheepish grin. "I've just never heard anyone call Phil *Mr. Philza* before." She chuckled again at the thought. "He's gonna flip when I tell him that one, oh Primes. As if Wilbur and Techno don't make him feel old enough."

Wilbur and Techno?! Oh, Tommy could cry. He was actually in the Watchtower, he realised numbly. He was actually interacting with actual heroes. Who were all just friends from work, really. Of course she called them *Phil* and *Wilbur* and *Techno*.

"Don't you fuckin' dare." The words had escaped his lips before he could stop them, and he felt his ears turn red. His mouth continued to run in a weak attempt to cover up his embarrassment. "That would be so horrible for me, oh Primes. And I really need this job—"

"Relax, kid, I'm just pulling your leg," Puffy said with a mischievous grin that suggested otherwise. "Phil wouldn't even be mad, really."

And then the elevator was sliding to a stop, at floor eighty-seven. Tommy's rocking on his heels picked up in speed.

"Good luck with your interview," Puffy said after a beat, eyes still trained on him. "The, um, doors are gonna close—"

"Yep," Tommy agreed, and rushed forward in a burst of courage. On a split second thought, he turned around and awkwardly saluted the hero. "Nice meeting you, Ms— um, Cap. Captain."

Puffy grinned. "You too, kiddo."

And then the doors were closing again, and he was alone. Tommy let out a long, stressed exhale, turning again to acknowledge his inevitable doom. SBI's floor, huh? It wasn't bad. Well, it was actually breathtaking, but he wasn't about to admit that. It was mostly open plan, and well lit by floor to ceiling windows; around the corner, he could see the edge of a smooth marble kitchen, and a grey sofa that looked far comfier than anything Tommy had ever had the pleasure of sleeping on.

"Hullo?"

Tommy's eyes moved painfully slow to his left; the first door had just opened (so smoothly that it didn't even creak) and a large, imposing figure was standing in its frame, staring down at him.

His heart rate was through the roof. There, in all his glory — and, um, sweatpants? — was the Blade.

"Holy shit," he breathed, and really couldn't stop his jaw from dropping this time. Fortunately, he was quick to catch himself. "Sorry." He wasn't.

Tommy liked to consider himself tall for his age; really, he was, but everyone he ever met just seemed to have height to the freakish extent on their side. Ranboo was part enderbeing, giving him at least an extra foot on the boy (they hadn't ever measured him. Tommy wasn't sure there were measuring tapes long enough) and yet again, he was facing up to a hybrid that made him feel another three feet shorter.

Technoblade wasn't just tall, but broad, too, well-built from the regular fights he engaged in and undoubtedly the intense hero's training he underwent on the daily. If his build wasn't enough to intimidate, his tusks certainly were; a prominent feature that betrayed his hybrid background where they protruded from the corners of his mouth. Altogether, he was a really scary guy.

But there in the doorway, his pink hair pulled into a low ponytail, donning a loose t-shirt and sweatpants, and glasses of all things resting on his nose, he looked... oddly domestic.

"Oh," Technoblade spoke again, breaking the silence of their staring contest, "you must be here for the interview."

"Yup," Tommy replied quickly, before his tongue could freeze up again. "That I am. I am here for the interview. The interview with Philza Minecraft. Yes."

"Alright, kid," Technoblade cut him off, and if there was the faintest glimpse of amusement in his eyes, it was gone in an instant. "Next door right there. Break a leg."

Tommy squinted at him, trying to decipher whether the Blade actually wanted him to break a leg or not. With a man of his reputation, it was hard to tell whether or not he would enjoy the casual violence.

"I think I would probably not get the job if I broke someone's leg," he deadpanned. "But if you insist. Who should I go for?"

The corners of Technoblade's lips twitched. "Wilbur."

Tommy nodded seriously. "On it."

Technoblade gave the boy a curt nod, and then headed across the floor without another word. Tommy watched him go, counting how long it took for feeling to return to his limbs.

Well, he really couldn't delay the inevitable any longer. He was almost definitely already late, which was an absolutely brilliant start, especially after cursing in front of both Captain Puffy and the Blade. He opened the aforementioned door with a sense of dread building in the pit of stomach; Primes, these doors were so quiet, it was weird.

At the end of the room, Philza himself was seated behind a desk, huge black wings all the more impressive against the bright window. He hadn't noticed Tommy enter the room, too busy engaged in a conversation with — *oh*. With *Ghostbur*.

"I really don't understand why we need an assistant," Ghostbur was saying, clearly irritated with the prospect. He, too, was in casual wear, though not as much so as the Blade, wearing a yellow sweater and ripped jeans. "We've been doing fine without one. What's changed?"

"Wil," Philza replied tiredly, rubbing at the bridge of his nose, "when was the last time you filed up a mission report after patrol?"

"I—"

"Or signed the roll for shared duties? Or even updated your calendar? You're not the one who has to hear from Dream every time you miss a meeting."

"Oh, whatever, that green prick can stuff it anyway—" Ghostbur cut himself off mid-rant, eyes focused on Tommy in the doorway.

Tommy swallowed hard. "Hello, gentlemen — um, Mr. Ph— er, hi, Phil."

Two of the highest rank heroes in the country were staring blankly at him. He couldn't feel his own pulse.

And then Ghostbur *snorted*.

"*Hi, Phil,*" he mocked, snickering, any anger from earlier drained immediately as he snuck a delighted glance at Philza.

Tommy grit his teeth. "Oh, shut up, man, Captain already gave out to me for saying Mr. Philza—"

"*Mr. Philza!*" Ghostbur parroted, laughter shaking his shoulders as he struggled to stand. "Oh Primes, Phil, I'm never letting this go, not ever."

Philza looked very tired.

"Mr. Philza," Ghostbur was still chuckling as he passed Tommy to leave the room.

"Dickhead," Tommy retorted, bristling at the contact as the other's arm brushed against his as he made his exit.

The door clicked closed behind him, and Tommy remembered vaguely that he was supposed to be nervous because of how badly he needed this job.

"Please don't mind Wilbur," Philza said with a light smile. "He can be a bit much."

Tommy froze. Was this a trap? He blinked, struggling to form words again. "I — um, no — he's okay, really—"

Philza lowered him an amused gaze. Tommy relented.

"Yeah, alright, to be honest, he could've been a bit nicer," he grumbled, and then stepped forward as Philza's smile widened.

"Take a seat," the older man offered, gesturing to the chair. Tommy settled into it and nearly jumped when he sank into the soft leather; it was surprisingly soft. Soft wrinkles creased at the corners of Philza's eyes. "Tommy, right?" he asked.

"Yup," Tommy replied, still a little shocked by the chair. He tapped his fingers against the armrests, a small distraction from his nerves as he tried to recall the little information he'd picked up from the job advertisement.

Philza leaned back in his chair, clasping his hands together as he examined the boy with an air of carefully restrained curiosity. His wings folded behind him, allowing a little more light into the room. Tommy found himself admiring how neatly each of his feathers were arranged, how smoothly they flowed with each movement of his wings.

"Tell me about yourself," Philza asked politely, and Tommy tried not to grind his teeth. Vague questions were the worst kind.

"Well, I'm eighteen," he began hesitantly, reciting what he was pretty sure was on his resume. There was a miniscule shift in Philza's expression so controlled he couldn't read whether it was a positive or a negative. "Up until two weeks ago, I'd spent nearly a year working at Bad's café—"

"Muffins and More?" Philza cut in, interest piqued. "Sorry."

"It's alright," Tommy said, easing somewhat into the conversation. "Yeah, that's the one. I'm sure you saw the news."

Philza nodded. "I'm sorry to hear about it."

Tommy's heart gave a light tug at the thought of his old boss, who was still out there missing somewhere. *Or dead*, his mind supplied helpfully. He waved away the emotion as quickly as it came.

"It's fine," he assured the man (though it wasn't, really. Not when he still had nightmares about what had happened to Bad, unable to shrug off the sense of dread). "I worked the register mainly, so I'd consider myself fairly handy with handling money and that. And my communication skills are top notch." The smile came a little more naturally this time. "Well, when I'm not nervous."

Philza returned his grin, and his chest swelled with sudden confidence. He was doing alright, wasn't he?

"Um, I live with my roommate in the fourteenth district," he continued. "Usually we both work full-time, so we don't have much time for hobbies and that. In the last two weeks though, the apartment's never been so clean. Very organisational, I am." If Philza saw through his white lie, he didn't show it. It wasn't entirely untrue, to be fair; they had so little belongings that the apartment couldn't be cluttered if they tried.

"Always good to hear," Philza agreed, pulling a clipboard into his lap to scribble a few things down. "You're a young man, you have any aspirations? What you want to do for a living?"

Tommy paused, swallowing down the small spike of panic. He hadn't prepared for this one; generally, his interactions with employers had never brought up long-term goals beyond the company, as this question implied. He forced his smile to return.

"Well, when I was a kid, I always wanted to be a hero," he said before he could filter his words, scrambling for an answer to fill the silence. He could already hear Ranboo cursing

him in his head; yeah, maybe this wasn't the smartest thing he'd ever said in his life. His heart pulsed against his ribcage. "Really admirable stuff you lot do, y'know?"

"Oh, are you enhanced—?"

"No," Tommy said, all too quickly, but Philza didn't seem put off. He managed an awkward chuckle. "Unfortunately. Just a human. It would be very poggers, though, I think, to have powers and that."

Philza let out a chuckle of his own, and Tommy reminded himself to breathe. "Yes, I suppose it is quite... poggers," he agreed, the word clearly foreign to his tongue.

"Which is why I thought this would be such an amazing opportunity," Tommy continued in a hurry, hoping to save his answer. "Not to like, spy on you or anything, but to have the chance to lend the city's coolest people a hand, even if it's just the small things — well, um, it would be an honour."

Philza beamed at him.

The questions continued like that for the remainder of the interview, and Tommy relaxed into the process more and more as they returned to the kind of inquiries he was used to. By the end, he felt nearly comfortable in his unreasonably soft leather chair, and there was a warm atmosphere in the room created by what was nearly casual conversation between the pair.

Casual conversation. With *Philza Minecraft*. Primes, Ranboo was never going to hear the end of it.

"Well, that was a wonderful interview, Tommy, well done," Philza said after what felt like all too short a time. He clapped his hands together as he straightened in his chair, and the sudden motion nearly made Tommy jump. "Thank you very much for your time."

"Thank you for yours," Tommy returned, taking the most relieved inhale he'd breathed all day. "Primes, that was scary. I mean, not that you're scary, just—" He fumbled with wild hand gestures for a moment, and Philza laughed.

"Not a problem, Tommy. I'll have a chat with Techno and Wilbur, and we'll get back to you as soon as we can."

"Of course," Tommy said, smile wavering a little at the mention of the pair. He wasn't as sure of the impression he'd made on them. "Because this position is assistant for...."

"The three of us, yes," Philza finished, raising an eyebrow. "Which you were aware of, of course."

"Of course," Tommy croaked. He had not, in fact, been aware of this.

Philza smiled. "Expect to hear from us soon."

Tommy stammered a goodbye, and nearly tripped on his feet in his hurry to get to the door. Fucking fuck, he'd only been messing with Ranboo when he'd joked about working with the Blade or Philza. All three SBI? He could have fainted.

Not to mention Ranboo's earlier warning of Ghostbur, who was one of the most notorious heroes for vigilante arrests across the city.

Yeah, this was fine. He probably wouldn't even get the job, despite how the thought brought a knot of disappointment to the back of his throat. Realistically, he was just some kid from the poor area of town who had no filter on his mouth.

The Blade and Ghostbur were both waiting right outside the door as he opened it, stumbling out into the hall. He squinted at them both, suspicion heavy in his gaze.

"Were you two eavesdropping?" he accused them, ears already burning red at the thought of all three heroes listening to him fumble over words.

"No," Ghostbur said immediately, though couldn't quite smother the smug grin on his face. The Blade glanced to the side, rubbing his nose.

"You *were*!" Tommy shot back, folding his arms with a frown. "That's quite rude, y'know. Invasion of privacy and shit."

"Hey, we're the ones you're gonna be working for," Ghostbur retorted, and Tommy didn't bother to correct him with the unsaid, *if I get the job*. "Of course we're gonna want to know if you'll be any good or not."

"Well you don't have to be all sneaky about it," Tommy grumbled, supposing the hero had a point. "I'll still break your legs. The Blade gave me permission."

The Blade snorted, and Tommy was so shocked he didn't even try to hide his expression. Ghostbur cast an accusatory glare at the piglin hybrid, who found this all the more amusing.

"Boys," Philza called from inside, a hint of a smile to his tone, "if you'll stop interrogating Tommy and come inside anytime soon, that would be great."

Ghostbur huffed, dramatically shoving the door as he entered the room, the Blade on his heels. The taller lingered in the doorway for a brief moment, glancing back to Tommy. Tommy stared at him expectantly, but the Blade simply nodded after a second of contemplation. The door closed after him, and Tommy sighed. Now for stage two of interview nerves: awaiting a response.

He leaned back against the wall of the elevator as it began its descent to the ground floor, exhaustion taking the place of the anxious energy that had been pent up all morning. However, he hadn't even reached the last ten floors before his phone rang, buzzing against his leg where it lay in the pocket of his jeans. He stared at the screen for a beat, puzzled, because he had just said goodbye to Philza, why on earth would the man be calling him already? Had he left anything behind? The thought of having to go all the way back up was draining.

Reluctantly, he picked up, pressing the phone to his ear.

"Er, hello?"

"Hello again Tommy," Philza's voice replied cheerily. "Sorry for this, mate. Just wanted to congratulate you again on a great interview, and if it's not too much bother, you can tell the next person in line that we won't be seeing them today."

Tommy's brain was exceptionally slow with processing the request. It was a bit of a bother, actually, he wanted to say; did Philza have any idea how awkward starting up that conversation would be?

And then the realisation hit him, and he blanked.

"Tommy?"

The boy's mouth had stopped working. "I — you're not saying — what?"

Philza's laugh was buzzy over the call. *"Yes, Tommy, you got the job."*

Tommy's jaw dropped.

"You can start tomorrow, if you're available. Is twelve o'clock alright?"

"Y-yeah, that's — wow, um — that's more than alright, that's perfect, yep, I'll be there—"

"Great. See you then."

"Yeah," Tommy breathed, barely able to move the phone from his ear even as it beeped that the call had ended.

Oh, he was so fucked.

Chapter End Notes

tommy: *is himself*

phil: yes. i want him. thats the one. hired.

let me know what you think of it!!! i'm beyond hyped for this fic omg

The Wrist Incident

Chapter Summary

Tommy risks a patrol the night before his first day at work, and faces the consequences.

TW// mild descriptions of violence/injury

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for [notes](#)

Ranboo made Tommy promise not to patrol that night.

"I'm serious, Tommy," he'd said sternly. "I know that look in your eye, I know you want to, but don't. At least not until you figure out the best way to manage things."

"I'll manage things fine!" Tommy insisted, though arguing with Ranboo was fighting a losing battle. "I don't start until twelve, Ranboo, I'll have loads of time to sleep in the morning, it's perfect!"

Ranboo narrowed his eyes at him. "It's not just about sleep, though. You're working with three of the top heroes now, and seeing all the rest of them on the regular. They're heroes for a reason, Tommy, they're smart and they'll pick up on all the little parts of your behaviour and figure it out before you can get paid—"

"I told you I'll be careful, Ranboo, and I meant it," Tommy said, sincerity flooding his tone before the frustration made a comeback. "Just a few hours. I'll cut it short tonight."

"Yes, by taking the night off," Ranboo agreed. "Tommy, I don't even have anything for dinner, it's not good for you to patrol without food. Just tonight, at the very least. Please."

And Tommy had sighed, and bowed his head. The energy under his skin buzzed uncomfortably with no output to release through.

"Alright," he said after a while. "I'll take tonight off."

"*Promise me.*"

"Your trust issues are showing, big man," Tommy joked, but Ranboo fixed him with an unrelenting glare and he surrendered. "Okay, okay, I promise."

Well, Tommy had never been very good at keeping promises.

His empty stomach meant nothing when he was being fuelled off of his nerves and excitement for tomorrow. And to be fair to him, he really had tried to go to sleep, but even their stiff old mattress — which Ranboo had insisted he take that night, in celebration of his new job — wasn't comfortable enough to lull him unconscious. He was positively itching to get up and move.

So he did. Ranboo wouldn't be too mad, right?

That brought him to where he was now, leaping from rooftop to rooftop with whoops and cheers of excitement as he crossed the city in search of people to aid. His magic, scarlet and swirling and wonderful, emanated from his hands and feet as he used it to boost himself across longer gaps or up higher jumps; he was pretty sure he could fly with it if he really tried, but that was an experiment for another day.

Magic was what he called his enhancement, because he wasn't really sure what else to name it. Ranboo called it "*advanced telekinesis and energy manipulation*", which was a mouthful and a pain in the ass to say. It was just magic; he could do pretty much whatever he set his mind to with it. He could grasp and move other objects with his powers without physically touching them; he could use his magic as a force of strength, pushing back people he didn't want near him and even unintentionally catching that one guy's bullet when he'd been shot at for the first time on patrol. His most recent discovery was his favourite so far; he could push and compact his magic into small objects, before releasing the energy and watching them burn up or explode.

That said, his new discovery was the most draining to perform. But that was all the more reason to practice it, of course.

He continued skipping over rooftops at a quick pace, following his usual path around the district. The wind caught in his hood and whistled past his ears as he made leap after leap, and his grin was wide under his mask. Primes, the thrill never got old.

Out here, under the faint stars with no limits as to what he could do, he was *free*.

He wouldn't trade the feeling for the world. If he'd known how addictive the rush of being a vigilante was earlier, he would have been doing this ages ago. He was nearly grateful for the incident at Bad's that had prompted him into action.

Nearly.

"Woo!" he let out as he gathered enough energy to fling himself across the street, a red shooting star for anyone below to admire as he zoomed past. He grinned at the thought; he'd only been patrolling for two weeks now, but already people in the district were becoming familiar with him. *His* people, he thought fondly. It was his duty to protect them.

His relief was palpable as all the pent-up energy from the day began to fizzle out through his acrobatics. If his stomach gave a pang of hunger at several points in his patrol, he ignored it; he still intended on keeping patrol short tonight. He owed Ranboo that much.

"Karl!" he called cheerily, recognising the colourfully-dressed vigilante from the fifteenth district as he passed where their districts bordered. He jumped down to the lower rooftop with a woop, staggering his fall with his magic.

"Oh, hello!" Karl greeted him in return, his face, like Tommy's, concealed under a mask. "You're out later than usual tonight."

"I had a late start," Tommy admitted. "I'll wrap things up soon enough, though. I've a big day tomorrow."

Karl's eyebrows rose up over his goggles in interest. "Got a new job?"

"Finally," Tommy laughed, though didn't spare the man any further details. Karl was a friendly enough vigilante, but he couldn't trust him with everything. Hence the man didn't even know his name. "How are you, big man? Been busy?"

Karl nodded. "Last week wasn't so bad, but the past few days have been a bit violent. Mostly gang stuff, I think. Hopefully nothing that won't calm down anytime soon."

"If you ever need a hand, just let me know," Tommy said. "Things haven't been any worse than usual here."

"You've your hands full with that district as it is," Karl said, shaking his head. "But I do appreciate the offer."

Tommy grinned. "Well, if you ever get desperate...."

"I'll know where to go," Karl finished, something akin to amusement playing on his tone. "I'll see you around."

"That you will," Tommy agreed, saluting the man. "Bye!"

And he was off again with a power-boosted leap, eager to keep patrolling.

Gang violence, he thought, making a mental note. *Fingers crossed that doesn't spread over here anytime soon*. Karl had a point; as one of the poorer districts, fourteenth was already more inclined to violence as it was. Tommy rarely had a peaceful night, or one without injury.

Case in point, the car robbery he'd just spotted underway down the street.

"Hey fellas," he greeted loudly as he dropped down from above, quite proud with how well he stuck the landing. "I hope you wouldn't happen to be robbing this fine vehicle."

"Oh for fuck's sake," one of the two men growled, spinning around in surprise. "Kev, you said this street was clear this time of night—"

Tommy cut him off with a punch to the jaw. "You guys know my schedule already?" he quipped. "Fan behaviour, lowkey."

"You little freak!" the other one — *Kev*, apparently — snarled, pulling a crowbar from the inside of his coat.

"Oh, an *armed* robbery!" Tommy said pleasantly. "My favourite kind."

He grasped the crowbar with his magic, scarlet energy enveloping the object before ripping it out of the criminal's hands and tossing it across the street.

"Go fetch," he teased, before the first man was back on his feet and swinging his fists. Tommy's hand shot up just in time and sent out a pulse of magic, and he watched in satisfaction as the man went flying.

A rough hand had latched onto his outstretched wrist before he could draw it back. "Kev" had not gone fetch.

Tommy grit his teeth, hissing in pain as the criminal yanked hard on his wrist, twisting it past the point of comfort and throwing Tommy to the ground. That was a little embarrassing, but he supposed he was a light enough kid, and not too difficult to throw around the place.

He kicked the man's legs out from under him with a well placed hit to the back of the knees, and smirked in satisfaction as the man toppled to the ground, caught off guard by the manoeuvre. Unfortunately, as Tommy went to push himself to his feet, he noted that his wrist didn't want to bear weight. *Just what I needed*, he thought, switching to his other arm before the man could get up. He kept him pinned to the ground with a knee and cuffed his hands with one of the many zip ties he kept on him.

"You're a fucking menace," the man sneered, but was effectively immobilised on the ground.

"Hey man, I wasn't the one breaking into someone's car," Tommy pointed out. "Have fun in prison."

He restrained Kev's accomplice in a similar fashion, though the other man had already been knocked unconscious from hitting the wall. He couldn't afford to call the police, not when he himself could get arrested, but it generally didn't take too long for some passers-by to notice the beaten criminals and get the authorities on the scene.

Tommy made the smart decision to head home after that; he nursed his throbbing wrist to his chest as he made a beeline for the apartment, praying it wasn't broken.

As he slid in through the open window, he noticed, with a sinking feeling in his stomach, that the lights were on. Ranboo was standing expectantly in their kitchen, very much awake.

Ah. Great.

"You are the absolute *worst*, TommyInnit."

Tommy pulled off his mask with his left hand, shooting his roommate an apologetic smile. "Is it really that surprising...?" he asked meekly, trying to diffuse the situation with humour.

Ranboo, who clearly hadn't slept much better than Tommy, thankfully didn't have the energy for a fight. Tommy counted his lucky stars as the older teenager sighed, a telltale sign that he

was filing away this problem for later.

"I suppose not," Ranboo said, though his expression didn't lighten up. "That doesn't mean you're not the worst. You're the biggest idiot I know, and I'm still angry with you."

"I know," Tommy said quietly. "I'm sorry. I just... you know how I get. I *had* to go."

"Yeah," Ranboo agreed, tone icy. His gaze dropped to where Tommy was still holding his wrist, and he softened a little. "Can you flex it?"

"A little, but it hurts," Tommy said, demonstrating through grit teeth. "Some asshole grabbed me when I was trying to deal with his buddy. A bit stronger than he looked."

Ranboo hummed thoughtfully, stepping forward to gently pull the injured wrist towards him. Tommy let him, wincing slightly as his roommate and go-to medic examined the limb with careful pokes and prods.

"I think it's just sprained," he decided after a moment. "Take off your suit. I'll get an ice pack."

Tommy agreed wordlessly, carefully removing his 'suit' — it was the same hoodie and pants he'd worn on his very first patrol, now reinforced with elbow and knee pads he'd found in dumpsters around the district.

He returned to the tiny kitchen in his thin pajamas, and suppressed a shiver at the cold. Ranboo pressing the cloth-wrapped ice pack to his injury did not help this whatsoever, but did offer some relief in numbing the pain.

"Your dominant hand, too," Ranboo was fussing over it, "I do not envy you having to hide this from all the heroes tomorrow."

Tommy groaned at the thought. Yeah, he really hadn't thought this through, huh? "Okay, this one's my bad."

"You know it," Ranboo agreed. "Keep the ice on it for twenty minutes, then wrap it before you go to bed. That'll stop it from swelling up, at least."

"You going back to sleep?" Tommy asked, eyes following Ranboo as he made his way back to the cramped bedroom.

Ranboo nodded.

"Take the mattress," Tommy offered. "Y'know, for putting up with me and helping me out and stuff." Ranboo opened his mouth to decline, but Tommy wasn't having it. "Seriously, I doubt I'm gonna sleep much tonight anyway."

Ranboo managed a small smile of gratitude, and Tommy felt some weight leave his shoulders. "If I don't wake you in the morning, you can have the last of the cereal box," he said, and fixed Tommy with a stern gaze that shut up any complaints the blond was about to make. "Seriously. You'll need it."

"Thanks, Ranboo."

"Goodnight, Tommy."

Tommy wasn't sure when sleep finally overcame him, but by the time he woke up, groggy and sore, sunlight was shining in through the narrow window of their bedroom and there was nobody on the mattress. He bit back a pained whine as he went to use his wrist to push himself into a sitting position, and settled for a regretful sigh instead. Patrol was just about worth it for all the trouble he was going to have to go through at work today.

His heart fluttered a little in his chest. His first day at work was today. At the *Watchtower*. With all the big heroes—

Tommy quickly shut down the thoughts as excitement and nerves created a nauseating mix of butterflies in his stomach. Said organ was already growling desperately for sustenance, and he couldn't afford to throw anything up once he ate. *Not today, nerves, no thank you.*

He downed what remained of the contents of the cereal box (which was hardly a meal, but he didn't have much choice) and reminded himself that they'd be able to start buying more food again now that he had a job. *As long as I don't get arrested and lose it.*

That wasn't going to happen. It was all gonna be just fine.

The underground was the quickest way to the centre of the city from any district, and to Tommy's great luck, they rarely checked tickets, meaning it was easy to make use of the public transport system without paying a dime. He was not the only one who took advantage of this, of course, which led to a lot of weird people taking the train, but once he kept to himself and didn't bother anyone, it wasn't anything he couldn't manage.

Before he knew it, he was facing up to the grand building once again, gazing up at the Watchtower with both fascination and fear. He pulled his sleeves down subconsciously; though he'd succeeded in preventing his wrist from swelling by heeding Ranboo's advice, it had taken on an array of ugly bruised colours overnight, and wasn't something he really wanted on show to everyone.

"Morning, Tommy," Hannah greeted him as he gingerly pushed open the doors to the building. "Nice to see you back again so soon."

"Happy to be here," Tommy replied casually, glad the receptionist couldn't see his leg bouncing from behind her desk.

Hannah produced a small, laminated card from one of her many drawers and handed it over, along with a couple sheets of paper. Tommy examined the card curiously; "*Tommy Innit, green pass*" it read.

"That'll grant you access to any room you need to get into," Hannah explained, gesturing to the black stripe at the bottom of the card. "You'll have access to all the guest facilities, most of the rooms on SBI's floor, and a couple other things as well. I'm sure Philza will explain everything to you."

"Thanks." It's all gonna be fine.

"I just need you to fill out a couple things there," Hannah added, nodding to the papers. "We have most of your information from when you applied for the interview, but we just need a few more things."

"Yup," Tommy said, though faltered as she handed him a pen, glancing down at his wrist. Clumsily, he took the pen in his left hand, frowning. If Hannah noticed how slowly he had to write everything for it to be legible, she made no remark on it.

"Thank you very much," she said cheerily, as Tommy handed her back the paperwork. "Floor eighty-seven, in case you need reminding."

Tommy nodded with a weak smile, and headed back to the elevator. Primes, he wasn't looking forward to making the age-long trip to the top floors of the tower every single day.

The doors were opening to his destination before he felt at all prepared for them to do so, and he swallowed his nerves as he stepped out onto the now semi-familiar floor. Both doors on the left were open, and he peered in curiously only to find empty chairs at empty desks, with no sign of life.

Then he heard raised voices coming from the living area of the floor, where he'd noticed the kitchen and sofa yesterday.

"I am *not* being *whiny*, I just don't understand why you felt the need to invite some random stranger onto our private floor—"

"I've explained this to you already, Wil, we could really use some help around the place — especially you. And he seems like a good kid; you agreed with that yesterday."

"Well — that was yesterday. Opinions can change. And just because I agreed with that doesn't mean I was happy with this whole arrangement, or that I am now."

Tommy bit the inside of his cheek. Well, that was always reassuring to hear on the first day, that one of your new employers didn't want you here.

"Guys?" a third voice sounded, and Tommy glanced to where the Blade was leaning against the wall to his right, staring straight at him. "We have company."

Tommy wasn't sure whether to smile or grimace, so he settled for staring right back at the man. Intimidation tactics, and all that.

Philza popped his head around the corner from the kitchen, and his face broke into a wide smile upon seeing Tommy.

"Ah, Tommy!" he greeted cheerily, all past irritation gone in an instant as he hurried over, wings drawn up neatly behind him. "Good morning! Well, noon, I suppose I should say. How are you?"

Tommy blinked, tearing his gaze from the Blade to acknowledge the other man with a meek smile. "I'm good," he replied. "Um, how are you?"

"Just wonderful," Philza responded, sounding a little too stressed for the answer to ring true. "I hope I didn't surprise you too much with the phone call yesterday."

"It was a bit of a shock," Tommy admitted, pulling at his sleeves again. "I — er — didn't think I'd made such a good impression."

"Nonsense," Philza said in good humour, and then shot a pointed look over his shoulder to the kitchen. "We *all* agreed that you were the perfect fit for the job."

There was no response from the living area. Philza's smile twitched.

"Well, I'll find something easy to start you off with if you give me a few minutes," he continued, glancing back to Tommy as he shifted his wings. "In the meantime, there's no harm in you learning your way around the place. Tech? Grab Wil, would you, and show Tommy around the floor?"

The Blade grunted in acknowledgement and nodded to Tommy, who reluctantly followed him towards the living area. His eyes widened a little as he took in how big the floor actually was; the living area alone comprised of a modern yet homely sitting room set up — with three couches, a huge flat screen TV and floor to ceiling bookshelves — and a sparkling clean marble kitchen that was bigger than Tommy's whole apartment, and stocked with food, from the glimpse he got inside one of the cupboards where Ghostbur was idly looking through their selection of snacks. Said young man was looking particularly grumpy, and his frown deepened further as the Blade spoke up.

"I'm sure you heard Phil's instructions," the Blade said, voice gruff.

Ghostbur rolled his eyes as he shut the cupboard, turning around to face the pair. "Yeah, yeah, give him a tour," he snapped, though Tommy swore his expression relaxed just a fraction as he took in Tommy's presence. He glanced back to the Blade. "You're doing the talking."

The smugness to the Blade's voice was undeniable. "No, I'm not."

"I seriously hate you," Ghostbur said with a scowl.

Tommy couldn't help the amused cackle that came out of him, and he only grinned when Ghostbur whipped around to face him.

"What?"

"You didn't even try to argue," Tommy snickered. "That's kinda weak."

Ghostbur squinted at him. "Have you tried arguing with Techno? Yeah, didn't think so," he said. "Tommy, is it? Trust me, Tommy, that's a fight you won't win."

Behind him, the Blade's smirk was triumphant. Tommy was taken aback by the expression; he'd thought the Blade was supposed to be emotionless, a machine. That's what all the rumours liked to suggest, at least. But at home, in his own environment, he was comfortable and relaxed. It was weirdly... nice.

"So this is the main area," Ghostbur was saying, gesturing lazily to the open room around them. "We usually spend our breaks here. Feel free to eat whatever, as long as it's not from my cupboard, and we've got Netflix and that on the TV if you like any of that stuff."

Tommy was struggling not to let his jaw drop again. They didn't need to know he was *that* poor. But a full kitchen and a TV that huge? With *Netflix*? Ranboo wouldn't believe his ears when Tommy told him.

"The doors by the elevator are our offices," Ghostbur added. "We each have one—"

"Though I don't think Wilbur knows what the inside of his looks like," the Blade said.

Ghostbur fixed the hero a fiery glare. "If you're not doing the talking, then shut up."

Tommy stifled a laugh, all too amused by the pair's banter. He couldn't entirely tell if they got along really well or really poorly.

"Alright, if you come around this way," Ghostbur continued, leading Tommy and the Blade around the back wall of the kitchen to a carpeted hallway with four doors, "you'll find our rooms. Don't even think about trying to get into them, because they're locked to everyone but us. The guest room is the second door on the right — it has an ensuite, so if you ever need to use the bathroom, just go in there. It's quicker and definitely cleaner than the bathrooms on the public floors."

"Thanks," Tommy murmured sincerely, grateful for the offer. Taking the elevator all the way back down for just the toilet definitely sounded tedious.

"It's really nothing," Ghostbur said, a little surprised by the genuineness. "Then back around the other side of the floor is our own training room. It's nothing impressive compared to floor seventy-nine, but it's power-proofed, so if you're ever frustrated and need to let off some steam or something, go wild."

Tommy's heart skipped a beat. "I'm human," he said carefully.

Ghostbur blinked. "Oh, right, of course," he amended, and scratched at the back of his neck awkwardly. "Sorry. I forget that some people... don't have powers. You're nearly a rarity nowadays."

Tommy cleared his throat, hoping his weak smile didn't betray how uncomfortable he felt. "Yeah, especially in this building, I'd say," he said with a pathetic chuckle. *It's all fine. Just a slip-up on Ghostbur's part.*

"You can still go in there if you want," the Blade spoke up again with a shrug. "Throw some things around, scream. No judgement here. Everyone needs to let off some steam sometimes."

Tommy wondered just how often these people got so angry that they felt the need to do that. *But maybe it's not just anger, he thought, didn't you sneak out to patrol last night just to get rid of some energy?*

"Um, noted, I guess," he said. "Thanks for the tour, Ghostbur."

Ghostbur screwed up his nose in distaste at the remark. "Primes, just call me Wilbur. Never liked the dumb hero name anyway. Why am I the one who got the stupid name? I'm not even a ghost."

Tommy raised an eyebrow. "Isn't Philza's hero name just his name... with a *za* on the end of it?"

The Blade snorted. "Too right, kid. Mine's the best." He paused. "But for the record, you can call me Techno. The Blade is really just to scare criminals, and you're not one of those, so...."

If only you knew, Tommy thought dryly. "Alright, Wilbur, Techno," he agreed, though had to hide his cringe at addressing them so... informally. Were they on that level already? Tommy just worked for them, and it was his first day. "Though Techno *is* a bit of a weird name. *Technoblade*. Like, who looks at a baby and is like you know what we'll name this newborn child? *Technoblade*—"

Now was Ghost— *Wilbur's* turn to appear smug, unable to hide his glee at Tommy's ramble while Technoblade's smile fell into an unimpressed grimace.

"Boys?"

The three turned around at Philza's call to see the man approaching with a bundle of paper in his arms. He seemed to perk up at the sight of Wilbur's grin, wings straightening and smile widening.

"There you are. Done with the tour?"

Tommy nodded. "A fine establishment you have here, Phil."

Techno snorted and Wilbur stifled a laugh. Tommy grinned, the butterflies in his stomach slowly settling. He could do this.

"I'm glad you think so," Phil said, smiling. "I was thinking we could start you off simple today. I have a few of Wil's mission reports that he never got around to submitting — they just need a quick review, and a couple details added for some of them. I've already added you to the system, Tommy, so you'll be able to sign off on them."

Techno eyed the large bundle in Phil's arms and snickered. "Yeah, just a few."

Wilbur jabbed him with his elbow.

"Tech, you're wanted below on seventy-nine in the meantime, Eret's request. I think he wanted to go over the weapon storage with you," Phil added, and Tommy was beginning to see why they needed an assistant to manage all their information. "Wil and Tommy, you can come with me, we'll start sorting through these in my office. I won't be able to stay long though, I've to meet with Sam in twenty minutes; he's revising suit designs."

"Remind him about the waterproofing on mine," Wilbur said.

"I know, I will," Phil sighed. "He's doing his best."

"I'll see you all later then," Techno said with a nod, and made his way to the elevator.

Phil led Tommy and Wilbur back to his office, and Tommy happily settled into the plush leather chair once more. Wilbur pulled a chair over beside him, groaning as Phil began to place sheets in front of the two of them.

"Tommy, these ones are the mostly complete ones, you'll just need to sign off on them," he instructed, and then sent a more firm glance Wilbur's direction. "The ones I'm giving you, Wil, are mostly empty."

"I'm not going to remember half of these missions," Wilbur complained.

"Just do your best," Phil assured him. "Once you're caught up, they'll be a lot easier to manage."

He then handed them both a pen, and Tommy felt his heart sink. He glanced down at the first paper on his pile, scanning over it. *"Apprehended twelve enhanced individuals during an attempted bank robbery... no injuries sustained... fire hydrant... powers disabled..."* He could understand why Wilbur didn't enjoy writing these up. It seemed fairly boring.

Beside him, Wilbur was already writing at speed, scribbling down mundane details about each incident he'd run into on patrol. Tommy flexed his wrist experimentally and carefully hid the wince he made at the pain. He couldn't afford to be slow, not on his first day. He couldn't lose this job just as he'd miraculously got it.

Gritting his teeth, he took the pen into his injured right hand and scratched his name into the space at the bottom of the page, moving his wrist as little as possible. The signature was wobbly, even for him.

One page down. He put it to the side, and signed the next one. And then the next. And then the one after that.

He knew he hadn't signed that many by the time he was ready to give up. He was writing slowly as it was, and his fingers were trembling from the exertion and pain. Some discomfort must have made itself evident in his expression, because Phil suddenly spoke up.

"Tommy?"

Tommy bit down on his cheek hard, and met the man's concerned gaze. Wilbur paused where he was working, glancing between the two.

"Is everything alright?"

"Yup," he replied immediately, but realised too late that his sleeve had ridden up his arm just enough to reveal some of the colourful bruising. He pulled it down in a hurry, but Wilbur's eyes were wide.

"Shit, your wrist," he breathed, and met Tommy's gaze, reluctantly reaching forward. "Can I see?"

Tommy could already feel his face heating up with shame as the two worried heroes stared at him. It was too late to deny anything now. He'd already fucked up.

With a nervous inhale, he held his arm out to Wilbur. The hero took his hand with the utmost care and pulled up his sleeve gently. He sucked in a breath upon seeing the full extent of the damage, and Tommy stared down at his lap, ears burning. He already knew how bad it looked after unwrapping it that morning; he wasn't particularly eager to see it again.

"Primes, Tommy, why didn't you say anything?" Phil asked quietly.

"It's my first day," Tommy mumbled, aware of how lame the answer came across. "Didn't want to fuck it up already."

"It's just sprained," Wilbur said aloud, carefully feeling around the bruised area as Ranboo had done. "Hot, though. It needs an ice pack."

"We've got some in the freezer," Phil said, and Wilbur didn't utter a single complaint this time as he stood up out of his seat.

Tommy couldn't bring himself to look at either of them. He was strictly not going to mention any of this to Ranboo when he got home.

"Tommy," Phil said quietly, "what happened?"

"I fell on it," Tommy muttered. The lie came easily, and he just hoped the story actually made sense given the injury. "Tripped coming off the train yesterday."

Phil was quiet for a moment, contemplative. Tommy's heart was beating through his throat.

"I'm glad it's just a sprain," Phil murmured, "though I do wish you would have told me in advance, so I could have something other than paperwork prepared."

"Sorry," Tommy mumbled. "I can still do it—"

"Absolutely not," Phil cut in, and then relaxed, offering the boy a small smile. "It's alright, Tommy, there's most certainly other work to be done around the place that won't injure you any further."

Wilbur returned, then, ice pack in his hands, and Tommy couldn't help the sigh of relief that escaped him as the coolness touched his throbbing wrist.

"Twenty minutes on, a few times each day," Wilbur instructed with a soft smile. *Ranboo was right*, Tommy thought with a sense of pride.

"Say, why don't you come down with me and Sam?" Phil suggested. "You can just watch for today, it'll be a good learning experience. In future, you can help me with taking notes and drawing up blueprints and stuff. How's that sound?"

"More interesting than this shit, anyway," Wilbur enthused, but Phil shut him down with a firm look.

"Oh no, *you're* staying here," the older hero said, and Wilbur groaned, sinking into his chair. "Tommy?"

"Yeah, alright," Tommy agreed, perking up a bit. Everything was still okay, he assured himself. Nobody was suspicious of anything. He still had the job. "Enjoy the rest of the paperwork, Wilbur," he added after a beat, shooting the hero a cheeky smile.

"You little shit," Wilbur retorted, ignoring the pointed look he received from Phil at the remark. He huffed. "I think I might sprain my own wrist. Can't be worse than this."

"At least get *some* of it done," Phil said, shaking his head in amusement. "We'll be back up for lunch."

"See you later," Tommy said cheekily, holding the ice pack to his wrist. Wilbur rolled his eyes, but there was no malice behind the action, and Tommy smiled.

Yeah, this was okay.

Chapter End Notes

i really said let's speedrun chapter two

this one ended up being longer than i expected as well, i hope you all don't mind the length of it dksjdk

tysm for all the support so far! <3

Tommy's First Day

Chapter Summary

Tommy meets a few other heroes around the tower, and rejoins SBI for lunch.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for [notes](#)

In hindsight, Tommy probably should have realised that when Phil had said they were meeting up with Sam, it wasn't just any old guy named Sam. It really shouldn't have been a surprise; they were at the *Watchtower*, for Primes' sake. Yet as Phil opened the doors to one of the labs on the Science and Research floor (he had a black pass card; Tommy assumed that meant all-access), he still found himself gaping.

That was fucking *Awesamdude*. The hero famed for his use of explosions in battle and incredible intellect. Awesamdude's developments in technology — of *all* areas — were unmatched. Tommy had learned about him in school.

"Really? They teach about me?" the hero echoed, and Tommy flushed scarlet, realising he might have said some of that out loud.

"Well — yeah, of course they would," he responded, now eternally grateful for the cold of the ice pack keeping him grounded. "Your stuff is insane, man. You designed half the bloody Watchtower — and your work with renewable energy? Primes, you're a *revolutionary*—"

Sam's laugh was good natured, though Tommy still felt the heat of embarrassment in his cheeks. Phil lay a hand on Tommy's shoulder, smiling curiously at the boy.

"You didn't mention you were interested in tech, Tommy," he mused.

"I suppose it's not something I thought I'd have the chance to get into again," Tommy admitted, and it was an honest response. "I was part of the robotics club in my old school, and I loved it — but when I left, I assumed that would be it, really."

He chose his words carefully; if he was supposedly eighteen, he should have graduated by now. Phil didn't need to know that he was still in school. Besides, it was true that he'd had no expectations of getting back into technology; the school he'd enrolled into when he and Ranboo moved into fourteenth barely had working toilets, nevermind a robotics club.

"Today's your lucky day then," Sam said with a grin, and beckoned them further into the lab.

Tommy's eyes must have been the size of golf balls as he took in every inch of the room he could. For one, the place was massive, bright despite having no windows and clearly kept well clean. For another, the technology left him awestruck. From custom machines to the half-made weapon parts scattered across tables, this was stuff of the highest spec.

Sam led them to a wide square centre table, and upon pressing a few buttons on its side, a three-dimensional blueprint of a hero suit was projected into the air above them. Tommy's jaw hit the floor.

Sam grinned at him. "Cool, don't you think?"

"The coolest fucking thing I've ever seen," Tommy agreed, nodding vigorously. He examined the familiar suit pictured in the hologram for a moment, thoughtful, and then it clicked. "That's 404's suit."

"404's *old* suit," Sam corrected him. "We're making him a new one."

Tommy glanced to Phil curiously. "I didn't take you for the modern techy guy either," he said bluntly.

Phil chuckled. "I hope you're not implying I'm too old for it," he joked.

Sam shook his head in amusement. "You're right though, Tommy, Phil doesn't usually help out in the labs. But he knows a great deal about magic, and given how spells are George's main offense and defense on the field, I figured he could give me some valuable input."

Tommy couldn't help the way his eyebrows rose in interest. *If you weren't lying about being human, you could probably get loads of help from him about your powers*, a bitter voice supplied. He brushed it away. His secret was more important than whatever pointers Philza Minecraft had to offer him. Even if they were probably really, really cool.

"George has been complaining about the magic absorption factor we incorporated into his robes," Sam was explaining, but then he reached forward and zoomed in on the hologram in midair, and Tommy squeaked.

"It's *interactive*?!" he exclaimed, mouth falling open once again. "Philza, catch me, I'm going to pass out."

"Please don't," Phil joked lightly, though moved a little closer to Tommy regardless.

Sam wasn't at all mad that he'd been interrupted. On the contrary, he looked positively delighted with Tommy's response.

"Fully interactive," he replied, grinning from ear to ear. "You can zoom in or out, spin it around, tweak certain parts of it and even draw new blueprints directly onto it."

"Holy fucking shit," Tommy breathed. He was speechless.

Sam nudged Phil. "If you ever get bored of your new assistant, I'll take him."

"I'm not handing him over that easily," Phil snorted. He stepped closer to the hologram, examining it curiously. "You said George was unhappy about the magic absorption factor? I

thought he requested it so the suit would be more user-friendly?"

"He did," Sam responded, tapping into the robes of the suit, and up popped a magnified section of the fabric. Tommy gaped. "And he says it's still an improvement on his previous suit. But the issue he's found now is that the suit is taking away from the power of his spells. It absorbs magic as he's trying to cast it, which reduces their efficiency."

"So perhaps if we weakened the effect of the magic absorption," Phil mused aloud, rubbing his chin in thought. "Enough so that it doesn't take away from his spells, but still holds magic, so he can cast whatever enchantments he likes on it."

"Precisely," Sam agreed. "It's tough to balance, but I believe it's doable."

"Have you tested other materials?"

"Some, but none are as compatible with George's magic as this. They would reduce the absorption factor, but any enchantments cast on them would be considerably weaker."

Tommy had been examining the magnified image of the robe fibers curiously.

"Why don't you reduce the amount of whatever material you mixed in?" he piped up. Phil glanced at him in surprise.

"Tried that already. It also saw a reduction in enchantment efficiency," Sam reported, though seemed happy with the input.

Tommy paused, thoughtful. "And if you changed the pattern by which the material is weaved in?" he suggested. "Maybe something looser would trap less magic in the suit."

Sam snapped his fingers, beaming at him. "Exactly what I was thinking," he said gleefully, and Tommy felt a rush of satisfaction. "And what I wanted to try out today."

"Good job, mate," Phil said cheerfully. Tommy could have glowed with pride.

"Tommy, right?" Sam asked.

"Yup."

The green-haired hero turned to Phil. "I want him."

Phil grinned. "First come, first serve. I got him first."

Tommy was most definitely going to tell Ranboo about this. Sure, they were only messing, but two top heroes jokingly fighting over him? Primes, what was his life?

They spent the next hour or so creating small squares of several different patterns. Tommy, with his sprained wrist, was not allowed to participate in the weaving, but Sam was content to let him play around with the blueprint and swap ideas for the suit redesign back and forth with the adults. 404, or George, as Sam and Phil called him, was a mage — and one of those real old-timey ones as well, who enjoyed the aesthetic of flowing robes as part of his suit, despite the challenges brought about with making said robes protective and battle-efficient. His magic was a different kind to Tommy's, unstable and uncontrollable without the use of his staff to harness it. It was interesting, learning about the hero and his powers, all while tackling the conundrum of his new suit.

It became even more so when Sam called in George himself, and Tommy had to do his best not to stare in the presence of yet another top-ranked hero. He didn't think he'd ever get used to it.

"Hello," George had greeted him politely, upon noticing the boy beside Phil. George was one of the quieter personalities in the tower, though a very cool one nonetheless.

"Hi George," Tommy had replied, maybe a little too brashly for a first introduction. He couldn't quite help it, giddy amongst all the magic and technology.

He'd then sat back and watched with wonder as Sam and George methodically worked their way through the various patterned samples. Where Tommy's magic was a vivid, swirling red, George's was a misty sheen, hues of every colour of the rainbow peeking through in each spell. It was mesmerising, in a way.

Sam and Phil took notes diligently after each sample was tested, and Tommy had to swallow down a small amount of guilt that the note-taking should have been his job. However, neither of the adults seemed at all bothered by his inactivity, and he was content to merely observe for now, anyway.

That was, until his empty stomach decided to betray his lack of food intake from the past two weeks, and growled loud enough that Tommy was sure Hannah could hear it all the way down in reception.

"Sorry," he said, flushing red at the noise and wrapping his arms around himself as if to stifle any further complaints from his stomach.

Phil laughed lightly, casting a glance at the clock on the wall. "Not at all, Tommy," he assured the teen with a kind smile. "We should be heading back up for lunch anyway."

"Thanks for all your help today," Sam said, and shot Tommy a grin. "*Both* of you. Feel free to come down any time."

"I'm sure we'll be back soon," Phil said. "Wilbur is desperate for that waterproofing upgrade."

Sam nodded, smile twisting into a more contemplative expression. "He won't let me forget it. I still haven't cracked the mechanism, yet. I'll let you know when I do."

"Thanks, Sam," Phil said appreciatively.

The other hero waved him off with a grin, and then Phil and Tommy were on their way back to floor eighty-seven. Tommy was struggling not to let on how eager he was for lunch; between last night's patrol, the excitement of his new job, and the energy put into healing his wrist, he was absolutely starving.

"You did well down there today, Tommy," Phil was praising him as they stepped out onto their floor. "I'm really impressed, actually."

Tommy positively preened at the compliment — *Philza Minecraft* was impressed with *him*. Primes, maybe this whole thing was some sort of too-good-to-be-true fever dream.

"It was fun, actually," he replied, subtly pinching his arm just to check. "Not that I thought it'd be boring or anything — but it was really interesting."

"I'm glad you thought so," Phil said pleasantly, drawing up his wings. "Sam certainly seems taken with you anyway. I'm sure he was happy to have some appreciation for his work."

"He deserves it," Tommy said, about to go off on another ramble about the hero, though trailed off, distracted by voices from the kitchen.

"Yeah, alright, it's not that bad, whatever," Wilbur was saying, as if the confession pained him to admit.

"I told you you'd warm up to it eventually," the baritone voice of Technoblade replied.

"I never said I'd warmed up to it," Wilbur corrected him. "Just that it's not the worst."

"What, you still have an issue with it?"

"Uh, yes? I still don't like sharing our space. Just because I'm willing to compromise doesn't mean the problem doesn't exist anymore."

Oh, Tommy realised. So they weren't talking about food, but him. Again.

"If you haven't noticed," Phil spoke up from beside him, "you're Wilbur's favourite topic of conversation."

Tommy shrugged. "I'm a very interesting person to talk about."

"He'll warm up to you quick," Phil said with a smile. "He already has quite a bit. Though he'd probably die before admit that."

"He seems the type to pull a stunt that dramatic," Tommy deadpanned. He grinned to himself as Phil laughed at the remark.

"And they return," Technoblade announced loudly, effectively shutting up Wilbur as the pair entered the living area.

Tommy faltered, lingering at the edge of the room as he watched the three heroes mill about the kitchen. They clearly knew their way around well, moving almost subconsciously to prepare their respective lunches. The setting was so domestic for what he'd assumed was a usual workplace; yet despite that, he suddenly felt horribly out of his depth.

What was he doing, hanging around with top heroes in the Watchtower? Of course, they were the ones who'd hired him, but he really was just some broke kid who'd tried his hand at working with the big shots and gotten lucky. He felt like he'd tricked them, somehow.

Even now, as Techno busied himself at the cutting board and Phil and Wilbur settled down around the table, partaking in the entirely mundane event of eating lunch, Tommy felt out of place. He pulled at his sleeve, trying to convince himself that everything was okay with the

same enthusiasm he'd had only a few moments ago. They were all just people too, in the end — once you took away the fancy titles and powers trained to perfection.

"What did Eret want, Tech?" Phil was asking.

"Oh, nothing much. She was just reorganising the weapons storage; wanted to make it more efficient. Said we might need more space if you get the go ahead for that training programme."

"Still waiting on the council for a response, I'm afraid."

Someone laughed almost coldly at that; it sounded like Wilbur.

"They're so slow to process anything that goes through their offices, you'll be lucky if it's approved by next year."

Phil hummed an agreement. "I'll get it going soon enough... though I might have to twist a few arms." A pause. "Did you finish those reports, Wil?"

"Hardly, you saw the size of the stack. They'll take me the week, at least."

Techno glanced over at Tommy, then, and the boy was almost caught off guard. "How's your hand?" he asked. "Wil told me you had an injury."

"S'alright," Tommy answered evenly, though didn't pull up his sleeve. He shifted his weight, holding himself a little taller. "Nothing a big man like myself can't handle."

Something akin to amusement glittered in the man's eyes behind his glasses. He beckoned to the younger. "Well, you'll probably still be out of action for a couple days, at the very least. What do you want for lunch? I'll make it."

"Oh, you don't have to—"

"It's really no big deal, kid," Technoblade insisted, and Tommy recalled Wilbur's earlier warning about engaging in an argument with the Blade. "Come on in, sit down. What do you want?"

Tommy hesitantly stepped further into the kitchen, but the question had thrown him for a loop. He'd never been faced with so many options in his life. He pulled at his sleeve nervously. "Um... what are you having?"

"Just a sandwich. Chicken, lettuce, mayonnaise, all that."

"I'll have that," Tommy chipped in eagerly.

Technoblade smiled. "Alright. Have mine, then," he offered, and shoved the plate across the table towards him. At the sight of Tommy's unsure expression, he grinned. "Really, it's alright. I was gonna have to make another one anyway, if you wanted one."

"Okay," Tommy agreed after a moment, taking a seat next to Phil. "Thank you."

Techno made a noise of acknowledgement, turning back to the cutting board, and from across the table Wilbur raised his eyebrows at Phil, a smug expression settling on his face. He mouthed something to the older hero, though through a mouthful of toast, it was a little difficult to make out.

Techno side-stepped so he was behind Wilbur, and made a very intentional jab of his elbow into the man's back. "Whoops," he said, not sounding at all apologetic.

Wilbur swallowed his food the wrong way as a result, and was choking on it, face turning red. "What the fuck?!" he managed between coughs, and Tommy was struggling to hold in

his laughter. "I didn't even fucking say anything!"

"I could just tell."

Phil gently nudged Tommy from beside him, and the boy glanced up in surprise.

"You gonna eat, mate?"

Tommy glanced back to the sandwich, mouth watering at the sight of it alone. He was just hoping to digest the butterflies in his stomach first (because holy shit, he was eating lunch with SBI, what the fuck).

"Yeah, of course," he replied with a smile, and as Techno seated himself opposite Phil, he didn't really have an excuse to wait any longer.

The moment the food hit his mouth, his body kicked right back into action, seemingly recalling just how famished he was. The sandwich was good, that much was true, but it could have tasted like shit and Tommy would have wolfed it down all the same. He couldn't stop himself once he'd started, the relief of finally having a full meal stronger than any guilt he'd felt for intruding on the three heroes' space.

"Easy mate, it's not going anywhere," Phil said lightly, exchanging a bewildered glance with Wilbur and Techno, but the words only slowed Tommy down for a moment before his instincts took control again.

When he swallowed down the last bite of the sandwich, unsure of whether or not he had chewed it at all, there were three pairs of eyes trained on him. Wilbur held a slice of toast halfway to his mouth, and Tommy didn't think he'd eaten a single bite in the time Tommy had finished his sandwich.

"Are you *good*?" said hero questioned, raising an eyebrow at him.

Tommy's ears went red at all the attention. "Yeah. Um... sorry."

"No need to apologise, mate," Phil said. "Er... would you like another one?"

"No, no, it's fine," Tommy insisted quickly, embarrassment bringing heat up to his cheeks. Really, he wouldn't have minded another three sandwiches, but he knew that would make the whole situation a lot weirder than it already was. He cleared his throat. "Sorry. It was just... um, a really good sandwich, Techno."

Technoblade blinked. "Didn't think I was that good," he remarked, a small grin forming. "Thanks for the feedback, Tommy."

"Primes, now look what you've done," Wilbur groaned. "His ego will be even bigger now."

"Says you," Techno shot back.

Wilbur straightened immediately to hit the man with a witty retort, but Phil was quicker to intervene.

"Boys, boys," he chided them lightly. "Wil, why don't you fetch Tommy a drink?"

Wilbur sighed, reluctantly pulling himself out of his chair. "What do you want, Tommy?"

Tommy blinked. "Just water's fine," he decided to settle on.

"Wrong answer, water sucks," Wilbur said, grabbing a glass from a cupboard. "We have apple juice, orange juice, uh, pineapple juice, because Techno's fucking weird, cranberry because Phil's old—"

"Apple's fine," Tommy said quickly, before Wilbur could irritate his coworkers any further.

The glass was placed in front of him after a moment, and Wilbur retook his seat opposite Tommy. Techno pulled out his phone, scrolling idly, and Tommy eventually decided it was safe to do the same. He just needed the comfort of a familiar face, honestly.

He took a subtle picture of himself at the table and captioned it *"IM HAVING LUNCH WITH SBI HELP ME"* before sending it to Ranboo. The phone signal in the tower was the fastest he'd ever seen.

He smiled at his phone as Ranboo replied almost immediately; he too was probably on his lunch break. *"hope everything's going well man, call if you need me"* the response read, accompanied by a poorly lit picture of his friend's two-toned hair, clearly taken from under a desk. *"Will do"* he sent back, before glancing up at the mention of his name.

"What'd you and Phil get up to with Sam, Tommy?" Techno asked. He'd put his phone away, so Tommy did the same.

"Nothing much," he replied, trying to come across as casual despite how his chest buzzed happily at the thought of what he'd helped with earlier. "404— um, *George* put in a request for a new suit, so we were just messing around with different designs and stuff." He couldn't help his grin. "It was very cool."

"Tommy's brilliant with tech, too," Phil mentioned, and Tommy wasn't sure whether he wanted to burst from pride or embarrassment. "He had ideas I wouldn't have thought of in a million years."

"Really?" Wilbur said, apparently surprised. He glanced between the pair. "Did you tell Sam ___"

"Yes, Wil, he knows you want the waterproofing," Phil interrupted, rubbing at the bridge of his nose. "He said he'd let you know once he figures it out."

Tommy couldn't help his curiosity. "What d'you want a raincoat for so bad, anyway?" he inquired, raising an eyebrow at the hero. "It's literally summer."

"That's... confidential," Wilbur said carefully. "Not information we usually broadcast—"

"Water disables Wilbur's enhancement," Techno cut in, and the glare Wilbur turned on him was so fierce Tommy was surprised the hybrid didn't burn up on the spot. Instead, he continued as casually as ever. "Stops him from being able to phase through things."

"You're the fucking worst and I hate you," Wilbur growled, burying his face in his hands. "Besides, it's not like *you* don't have a weakness."

"I don't."

"Water," Tommy echoed, bemused. "Fucking *water* and your powers don't work?"

"I didn't choose the fucking thing," Wilbur snapped, red in the face.

"But you... drink water?"

"Not if he can help it," Techno snorted. "Caffeine addict."

"Drinking it is different," Wilbur sighed, surrendering to the conversation. "Dunno why, but thank fuck it is. No, it's just if I get wet — be it rain, or a fucking fire hydrant—"

Oh, Tommy thought, recalling the first mission report he had signed. That's what that was about.

"But why's waterproofing your suit such an issue?" he interrupted, baffled.

"We've been experimenting with it for a while, now," Phil explained, leaning forward. "But no matter the material, waterproofing the suit ends up disabling its ability to phase with Wilbur, unless he phases *out* of the suit. Sam's trying to come up with a way for the suit to shed the waterproof layer when necessary, but it's... not simple."

"And even if I shed the waterproof layer, if it's not immediately replaceable, there's not much point," Wilbur added. He made a face. "Once they realise they can target you with a garden hose or whatever the fuck, they don't stop."

"Huh. I guess that is a pretty annoying problem," Tommy mused, though he couldn't deny that the challenge to solve the issue was a tempting one to tackle. Maybe he was a nerd or whatever, but problem-solving was an under-appreciated, satisfying activity.

"Phil said you're good with tech, right?" Wilbur pointed out, as if having read Tommy's mind. He raised his eyebrows at the boy, and then glanced at Phil. "Maybe Sam could use a fresh perspective...?"

Tommy certainly wouldn't complain about returning to the fancy labs. He perked up at the suggestion, but Phil was already shaking his head in light amusement.

"Another day, perhaps," the man said with a smile. "I'd like for Tommy to see a bit of all the work we do around the place today, not just suit development. Especially given his injury, today's a good opportunity for him to just observe and get used to what he'll be doing."

Tommy lowered his gaze, trying not to hide his disappointment. *You're here to work, not have fun*, he reminded himself, *as unbelievably pog as this whole thing is*.

"Sorry about that again," he murmured sheepishly. "I should have rang in and let you know."

"As long as you keep it in mind in the future," Phil said gently, "though fingers crossed you won't be spraining your wrist again so soon."

Tommy hid his wince; he strongly doubted that this would be the last of his injuries, somehow. "You don't have to worry about paying me for today," he said instead.

Phil shot him an odd look. "Why... wouldn't I pay you?"

Tommy met his gaze, equally confused. "I haven't done anything?"

"You were never going to get much done today anyway, Tommy," Wilbur pointed out, swallowing his last bite of toast. "It's still your first day, injured or not."

"Of course I'll be paying you for today, mate," Phil told him sincerely, and then smiled. "Goodness, it makes no difference to us regardless."

Yet all the difference to me, Tommy thought, and didn't argue any further. He'd take the pay if they were willing to be that generous; the sooner he and Ranboo could return to eating full meals, the better.

"If it's alright with you, Phil, I wouldn't mind taking Tommy off your hands for the next while," Techno spoke up after a moment, clearing the odd tension that had settled over the table. "I've yet to update my schedule for the next few weeks. I can show him the ropes while I run through it."

"Of course, that's a brilliant idea," Phil agreed, clasping his hands together. "I'll probably still be in my office when you're finished; I've been meaning make a start on last month's city payments." At Tommy's bewildered expression, he grinned. "Compensation for property damage caused during missions, and all that."

"Primes, I didn't realise there was so much work involved in being a hero," Tommy had blurted before he could help himself, but Phil only chuckled at the remark.

"It's definitely overwhelming at times," he agreed, "but once you get into the swing of things, everything should become more manageable for all of us."

"What are you up to now?" Techno asked, nudging Wilbur.

The brunet rolled his eyes. "Fucking mission reports, still. Though I'm scheduled to patrol after dinner," he added, casting a wary glance at Phil. "Fundy's got meetings or something, I dunno, but I have to cover his districts as well, so I'll be gone a while."

"Multiple districts in one day?" Tommy said, incredulous. He could barely manage fourteenth alone in one night; he couldn't imagine covering that many on one patrol.

Wilbur shrugged. "It's not too bad. I get crime alerts for the area sent to my suit while I'm out, so I just tend to those and do a general sweep myself."

Crime alerts, Tommy thought with intrigue, *would be handy as fuck*.

"We'd better get back to it," Phil said, gesturing to the clock. "Dinner's at six, Tommy, so if you have any requests, make sure to get them in before then."

Tommy's eyes must have been bulging out of his head. Two meals with SBI every day? This job was either too good to be true or a nightmare; he hadn't fully figured it out yet in his head. He thought back to Ranboo with a pang of guilt, and wondered if he could find a way to sneak some food back to him. If he was going to be well fed, his roommate deserved the same.

Primes, his life was seriously unbelievable. He was really working in the *Watchtower*, with all of L'Manberg's greatest heroes — after being hired by *Philza fucking Minecraft himself*. He wasn't sure why the universe had blessed him so kindly, but he certainly wouldn't complain. The job was perfect, albeit a little overwhelming.

There was just the small little issue of the numerous lies he had to keep up in order to ensure his own safety.

It was only a small thing, anyway. He would be fine.

"C'mon, Tommy," Techno was calling, and the blond pushed himself out of his seat with a grounding breath. "And put your ice pack back on."

Totally fine.

Chapter End Notes

the bookmarks for this are so entertaining, someone just said "AAAAAAA" and honestly, felt

this chapter feels a little filler-y to me but i promise the next one will bring some interesting developments to the story ;)

An Unplanned Encounter

Chapter Summary

Tommy meets a familiar face on patrol, and panics as his two worlds begin to collide.

TW// mild descriptions of violence, nonsexual harassment

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for [notes](#)

Tommy's sprain healed quickly, to his great relief. For once he had agreed with Ranboo to take a couple days off of patrol, as much as the idea pained him. He'd gotten so used to the near-nightly routine of lapping the district and exercising his powers that the break left him buzzing with energy; whether that was what had helped the speedy recovery or not, he wasn't sure. Regardless, he was beyond eager to get back into his makeshift suit and patrol again.

He'd slowly been settling into a routine at the Watchtower, as well; the amazement at walking amongst heroes on the regular still had yet to wear off, and part of him doubted it ever would, but it was becoming easier to keep his face straight when his jaw wanted to gape in awe. No day was ever the same; it was always another hero, another job — Primes, another meal, too. SBI took turns cooking at dinner, and each of them was as good a chef as the other. In one way, Tommy was grateful he had the excuse of an injured wrist to avoid taking his own turn; sure, he could cook, but not with the quality of food SBI stocked their kitchen with. That was perhaps the only downside of his wrist healing. He was not looking forward to embarrassing himself.

The past couple of days, he had finally convinced Phil to let him use his wrist for smaller jobs. The man had been highly skeptical when Tommy had insisted it was well enough to write with, but eventually came around after a convincing demonstration of his wrist's nearly-painless flexibility.

As a result, he'd been adjusting to the various kinds of work he would be doing on the regular, and felt less guilty taking his pay at the end of the week. He had been able to help Wilbur sign off on all his old mission reports, and started on his and Techno's calendars — Hannah kept him updated with any schedule changes each morning as other heroes made various requests of SBI. Most notably so far, Phil had invited him to sit in on a meeting he'd called with all the biggest heroes of the tower; something about that training programme was

all Tommy had gathered, brain a little overwhelmed by being in the presence of so many iconic figures at once. Both George and Sapnap had been there, representing the Dream Team, as well as Captain Puffy, Foolish and Eret.

Yeah, Ranboo hadn't heard the end of that for hours.

All in all, Tommy was relaxing well into his new work environment. With no patrols, he'd had no new injuries to cover up, and there hadn't been any close calls with the other secrets he kept. His nerves had decreased greatly since his first day; the job was completely doable without getting arrested, despite Ranboo's warnings.

One of his favourite places to work remained Sam's lab. There wasn't often a reason to head down there, unless there were developments that directly involved SBI — Wilbur's waterproofing request, for one. Tommy enjoyed the technology and Wilbur needed a suit upgrade; it was a win-win situation, so they had convinced Phil to let Tommy spend a couple hours with Sam on one of their less busy days.

The waterproofing issue was certainly proving itself to be a challenge, and while Sam and Tommy hadn't solved it within those few hours, they had come up with a few new approaches that Sam could test on his own later on. Tommy had full confidence in the hero that he would crack the case sometime soon.

That said, he hadn't been expecting results *this* soon.

Tommy was on the train home when his phone rang. It was the same day he and Sam had earlier gone over the suit's structure and drawn up blueprints for various waterproofing designs; he had spent the rest of the day back on SBI's floor helping where he could before heading home at eight o'clock. His wrist was feeling better than ever, despite only a week having passed since the injury occurred, and he was practically buzzing at the prospect of patrolling again that night.

At the vibration of his phone in his pocket, he pulled it out, though frowned at the sight of an unknown number. He'd thought maybe it was Ranboo, asking if he wanted dinner (because for the first time in nearly three weeks, they had options again), but Ranboo was most certainly in his contacts, and did not have any other phone.

An anxious pit formed in his stomach at the thought that maybe his roommate had gotten into an accident, but he shook it off. Worst case, it was a prank call, or someone looking to sell something. He didn't have much to lose by answering.

"Hello?"

"Hey, Tommy—"

"Wilbur?!" Tommy took his phone from his ear for a moment to squint at it, examining the number. He returned it to his ear. "What the fuck? How'd you get my number?"

A beat. *"Tommy, it's on your file—"*

"Kinda stalker-y of you, big man," Tommy deadpanned.

"Can you let me fucking talk?"

Tommy paused, eyes flicking to the door of his train car as a group of rowdy, likely intoxicated men stumbled inside, bringing a cacophony of noise with them. He grabbed his bag and moved down a few seats, hoping his phone couldn't pick up the racket they were making.

"Tommy?"

"Yeah, sorry, go on."

"Sam just came up and told me he figured out the waterproofing. I thought you'd be happy to know."

Tommy perked up at this, a smile tugging at his lips. "Really?! Already? Primes, some man, Awesamdude is. How'd he crack it?"

He could hear Wilbur's grin even over the questionable connection. *"He said it was one of your suggestions, actually. Fuck if I understood a word of it, but he said something about downsizing the central... whatever, and then a box for the waterproofing, or something—"*

"No fuckin' way," Tommy breathed. He clutched onto his seat, sure he would ascend straight into the heavens with the pure pride and happiness that was filling his chest. "My idea? Was it the one where we compacted the central control unit of your suit — disc-shaped, of course, for practicality and minimum space occupation — and then inserted a unit for the deployment of the waterproofing layer? Because I had a lot of faith in that one. I think the design we came up with had, like, twelve refills—"

"Uh, yeah, sure, sounds about right," Wilbur said, with enough uncertainty that it wasn't at all clarified whether or not that was in fact the idea Sam had had success with. *"But listen, Tommy, um — the reason I called, really, is... well, I wanted to thank you. Seriously, I don't get how you have any understanding of technology, but Sam said you helped a lot, and... y'know. That's actually, like, really impressive."*

Tommy was grinning so wide that his cheeks hurt. He had to take a moment to collect himself, positively glowing with pride. He wished, more than anything, that he could have recorded the call, because he was going to have trouble believing after a while that *Ghostbur*, the hero, the icon, the L'Manberg legend, thought he, *TommyInnit*, was *impressive*. Somehow the praise meant more to him now than it had when Phil said it; it felt more hard-earned.

"Say that one more time, Wilbur?" he replied cheekily. "Sorry, I'm just not sure I heard you correctly. Poor signal, and all that."

"You little shit," Wilbur laughed.

He had started saying something else, then, but Tommy stopped listening in favour of acknowledging the growing ruckus from the men on the train with him. Two of them had

been shoved forward by the others, and were approaching him with a wobble in their steps and smiles that didn't look at all friendly.

"Hey, you," one of them called, his words slurring together.

Tommy ignored him, instead clenching his right fist experimentally. Yeah, he reckoned his wrist was healed plenty enough to punch his way out if it came to that. Though the number he was up against was a concern.

"M talking to you, hey," the man tried again, leaning against a pole for support. His buddies behind him were snickering loudly at the exchange.

"Tommy?"

He vaguely registered Wilbur's voice still buzzing from his phone.

"Sorry, *Ghostbur*," he replied pointedly. "Just zoned out, big man."

The response didn't quite have the desired effect, as the man closest to him cackled. Tommy didn't miss his friend moving around to the other side of his seat, though he was still keeping enough distance.

"D'ye hear that, huh? Talking to *Ghostbur*, he is!" The tone was mocking.

Tommy gritted his teeth. What was a bit of practice before patrol?

"Where's a child like yourself going all alone on the underground?"

That was what did it. "I'm not a fucking child," Tommy snapped back, tensing. The men only laughed.

"Tommy," Wilbur's voice sounded again, and he acknowledged it this time, the hero's tone having changed. It was colder, sharper. *"Where are you right now?"*

"Still on the train home," Tommy grumbled, eyeing the men carefully.

"Is someone bothering you?"

"It's nearly my stop anyway, big man. I'll be fine."

Right on cue to invalidate said statement, the man who had drifted around to his other side made a clumsy grab for his shoulder. Tommy wrenched his arm away with enough force that the man stumbled back in surprise, clutching his arm.

"What the fuck—"

"Touch me again, and we're gonna have a fucking problem," Tommy spat at him, heart beating in his chest. He glared at the others, who were squaring up for a fight. *They're all pissed off their heads*, he thought, weighing up his options. *I can take them.*

"Tommy, how far from the Watchtower do you live?"

Tommy really just wished Wilbur would hang up, so he could give hell to the men harassing him. "It's like twenty minutes on the train," he answered through a clenched jaw, "and then a short walk after that, I don't really know—"

"No, like, to drive."

"I don't fuckin' know, Wilbur, I don't have a car."

The other man who was closest to him stumbled forward, posed to swing, and Tommy took the risk, wrapping his magic around the man's ankle and tugging harshly to send him toppling to the floor. He hit the ground with a hard thud and groaned, though made no attempt to get up. Tommy was either subtle enough with his hand movements, or the men too drunk to tell, but they said nothing that suggested they'd noticed his magic. Instead, one of the men who had hung back shoved another forward.

"Fuck's sake — go get him off the floor, this piece of shit isn't worth it."

"If you were to guess," Wilbur was continuing to insist. "How far?"

"Primes, Wilbur, maybe like half an hour? Forty minutes with traffic? I don't know what to tell you," Tommy snapped, watching the group closely as they gathered up their fallen buddy and appeared to make a retreat, headed for the door.

The phone was silent for a moment. Tommy had to double check that the call was still ongoing.

"I'll pick you up tomorrow morning."

Now was Tommy's turn to fall into silence. "...What?"

"Tomorrow morning, I'll pick you up," Wilbur repeated. "Like twenty past eleven, is that okay?"

"Wilbur, what the fuck—"

"First you sprain your wrist getting off the train, and clearly the company isn't great," the hero continued, cutting him off. "I don't think the underground is working out for you."

"What the fuck — Wilbur, it's fine, I can manage it fine. Really."

"Mhmm. I'll be there in the morning, so don't leave without me."

"You don't need to drive me to work," Tommy argued, confused as to why the hero would offer in the first place. The men had backed off, no harm done, and alright, Wilbur didn't know that the wrist sprain wasn't because of the train — but the underground wasn't horrible. It wasn't great either, but it did the job. And it was more or less free, if you knew how to evade the guy they sent around checking tickets once in a blue moon.

"No, but I've already made up my mind about it. I'll drive you home, too."

"*What* — that's like two hours out of your day! No way. I'm fine."

"Listen, Tommy, I know you think the tower's amazing, but it's fucking boring when you're stuck there all day. Two hours in a car is better than two hours waiting around for someone to call me for training or patrol."

Tommy sighed, slumping in his seat. Nevermind arguing with Techno; Wilbur was just as much of a stubborn ass. "You don't even know where I live," he mumbled.

"Tommy, that's also on your file," Wilbur told him, tone softening. *"Regardless of what you think, I'm gonna drive down there tomorrow, so at least don't make it be a pointless journey."*

Tommy groaned. "You're a bitch, you are," he said, but there was no real malice behind the insult.

A noise of amusement buzzed over the phone. *"Sure, Tommy. Do you want me to stay on the phone? Are you alright?"*

"Nah, it's okay, big man. They fucked off. Think I scared them away," Tommy said.

Wilbur took the last statement as a joke, presumably, from his light laugh. *"If you're sure. I'll see you tomorrow, then."*

"Yeah, see you then."

Tommy hung up the call, then, and saved the contact to his phone. *Bitchbur*, he was tempted to put down, but decided against it to keep some semblance of professionalism between them. Primes, Wilbur could be some thorn in his side, but at the same time, he couldn't deny the soft warmth in his chest — that maybe Phil was right, and the hero cared more than he let on.

Tommy spent the evening excitedly recounting the day's events to Ranboo over the latter's dinner; since Tommy had started working at the Watchtower and eating with SBI, he refrained from eating at home as much as he could, saving what they had for his roommate, who arrived home much earlier. Ranboo exchanged his own stories from the day, and then the sun was setting and Tommy was donning his vigilante gear with an energetic grin, keen to hit the city.

It was ironic, actually, how he had mocked Wilbur on the first day for his weakness to water when it rained so rarely in the summer, only for it to start lashing rain that night. Tommy was beginning to wish he had his own waterproof layer as his hoodie and sweatpants grew heavy and cold with the water. As long as he kept moving, it didn't bother him too much, but he knew Ranboo would kick up a fuss about him patrolling in such weather conditions when he returned to the apartment.

And of course, if he wasn't deterred by the heavy rain, neither were the criminals. It didn't take long for him to happen upon an alleyway fight, drawn to the location by a high-pitched scream. He perched on the edge of a rooftop for a moment, observing the happenings below, and was surprised to recognise one of the figures moving about in the rain.

If the short pink hair (a more vibrant shade than Techno's) wasn't a dead giveaway, the blasts of water she was hurling at the people who had cornered her was. Niki wasn't a registered hero, and so she really shouldn't have been using her enhancement, but Tommy had fought with her before on his first day of patrol, and was familiar with her control over water. The

rain provided the perfect weapon for her, allowing her to gather it into large bubbles of water and blast her enemies away.

He dropped down beside her, grinning even though she couldn't see it under the mask, and let his magic flow into his fingertips, ready to go.

"Niki Nihachu," he greeted the woman cheerfully. "Nice night for a fight, isn't it?"

"I didn't have much choice," Niki replied, not an ounce of strain in her voice. She hurled another bubble of water into the face of one of the group, and Tommy noted that it hadn't been her screaming, judging by the noise the man made. "They kinda forced my hand. But yes, the conditions are ideal, really."

Tommy grinned, and as another asshole began sprinting towards him, he let his magic loose, enveloping the criminal and sending him flying. Niki laughed, and performed a similar move on the last one left standing with her water.

"I had it handled," she told him, though smiled anyway as she straightened her clothes.

"I know," Tommy agreed, "and as much as I would've been very entertained watching you beat the shit out of them...."

"I know, I know, you feel obliged to step in," Niki laughed. "Well, thank you, Tommy."

Ah, that was another thing; Niki, apart from Ranboo, was the only one in the whole city who knew who was under the mask of the red-and-white vigilante. He *had* mentioned that it had been his *first* day on the job when he helped her out before — he hadn't yet realised exactly how careful he needed to be to keep his identities separate. He and Niki knew each other well enough ever before his debut as a vigilante, which had made recognising his voice and speech patterns all the more easy for her. He was lucky that she was trustworthy.

"Not a problem," Tommy replied easily. "What did they want, anyway? Free pastries?"

Niki laughed. "They didn't really make it clear," she admitted. "Violence for the sake of violence, I think. Which is a little odd, even for fourteenth."

Tommy frowned, recalling what Karl had warned him about — an increase in gang violence. He'd been hoping it wouldn't spread into fourteenth, but maybe that was wishing for too much.

"How're things at the bakery?" he asked instead. "I've been meaning to stop by, but it's been busy with the new job and all."

"The bakery is great," Niki enthused. She faltered, then, a regretful expression settling on her face. "I do wish our increase in customers was due to something other than Bad's place closing down, though."

"Me too."

"You should definitely stop by, of course," Niki said, and smiled softly. "You can tell me all about your new job then."

"Now's not a good time?" Tommy teased.

Niki rolled her eyes playfully. "I know you're itching to get going, I can see it," she said. "I won't keep you here any longer. And I should probably get home."

"Of course," Tommy said. "Well, just call if you need me. I'll be out all night."

"I hope the rain lets up," Niki said earnestly. "Sucks to have a summer downpour this heavy while you're out saving lives."

Tommy's face warmed. "I wouldn't say saving lives," he laughed. "I just want the streets to be a bit safer. Primes, fourteenth could use all the help we can get."

"Well, consider this a token of thanks," Niki said, and outstretched her hand towards him; the water drenching his cotton clothes was pulled from the material until he was completely dry, draining into another puddle on the ground. "I know it won't last long, but it'll at least warm you up, I hope."

"Thanks," Tommy said cheerfully. "You don't mind calling the police for this lot, do you? They wouldn't be over the moon to find a vigilante on the scene if I waited around for them."

"Of course," Niki agreed with a nod, raising an eyebrow as one of the men lying on the ground groaned in pain. "I was just a concerned passerby who saw the fight."

Tommy grinned. "I owe you one."

"Hardly," Niki laughed. "You're a good friend. Speaking of, pastries are always free for you, in case you've forgotten. Don't let money troubles stop you from visiting the bakery."

"You're seriously way too nice," Tommy said, shaking his head in amusement. "I promise I'll pop by when I can."

Niki grinned. "See you then, Tommy."

Tommy saluted her playfully. "So long, Niki Nihachu."

The rest of his patrol remained largely uneventful; he intervened in two separate robberies, really pathetic attempts at theft, to be honest, and apprehended an attempted mugger who managed to get in one decent punch to Tommy's face. His goggles took most of the hit, thankfully remaining intact, though the side of his nose and his cheekbone had gently throbbed for a while afterwards.

He finished his usual sweep of the district, and then, for extra measure, went around a second time, changing up his pattern. He had enough pent-up energy from his break to do so without tiring, and was keeping the words of "Kev" and his fellow car-thieving criminal in mind, wondering just how many people had figured out his routine already.

The rain began to lighten up towards the end, and he found himself sitting atop one of the taller buildings in fourteenth, admiring the glow of the city lights against the weighted dark of the cloudy night. The Watchtower was alight in the distance, its bright glow visible even from its location all the way in the first district. He laughed quietly to himself, wondering how miserable Wilbur was, unable to patrol in the rain until Sam finished his new suit.

The light splash of shoes landing in puddles behind him scared him out of his skin, and he spun around with wide eyes, having nearly fallen off the edge of the building.

"Oh, sorry," the Blade said. "I didn't mean to scare you."

Tommy froze.

The Blade. The Blade was here, in fourteenth.

His heartbeat rapidly increased its pace as he took in the sight before him, paralysed by shock and fear.

That was *the Blade*. And sure, innerly he was aware that it was Techno standing in front of him, but Techno was warmer and kinder and laughed more. The Blade was an entirely different persona. The Blade was who he was looking at now.

As if he weren't tall enough already, the Blade's suit incorporated thick heeled boots, reinforced with a metal toe and offering him even more height to intimidate his victims with. His blood-red cape hung heavy on his broad shoulders, weighed down by the rain, and the boar skull he wore over the top of his face gleamed in the wet reflection of the city lights.

Most terrifying was the heavy-duty axe strapped to his back, among the various other weapons he kept on his person, and undoubtedly more concealed in his suit.

Vaguely, Tommy acknowledged that he needed to *run*. That he seriously needed to *get the fuck out of there*, like, *yesterday*. But he was so shaken by the sight of the hero in *his* district, in *fourteenth*, that he could barely move a muscle. His brain couldn't comprehend anything at all.

Heroes never patrolled out this far, not unless they were on set missions. Not that that mattered, though, because what he really should have been prioritising was his own skin. Because he was a vigilante. Illegally. And before him stood the hero rumoured to be unbeatable. Who he worked for.

"Um, hello? Are you even listening?"

No, Tommy thought, and somewhere in the blank panic of his mind, gears started turning again. *No I am not*.

He stumbled backwards, magic surging right beneath his skin stronger than it had all night.

"No, *wait*—"

The Blade darted forward as Tommy tipped backwards off of the building, but Tommy was prepared for the drop and let himself fall, twisting to pick his landing spot on the lower rooftop as he used his magic to slow his fall.

Run. Run. Run.

He began a reckless dash across the city, adrenaline flooding his system as he stole a glance over his shoulder and discovered that he was, in fact, being pursued by one of the biggest heroes in the country.

He jumped from rooftop to rooftop, using his powers to throw himself across insane gaps that he was sure the Blade couldn't follow. He was, unfortunately, wrong. The Blade kept pace with him easily, no matter what route he took. He showed no signs of slowing, and Tommy, after two laps of the entire district already, was beginning to tire.

Panicked by a glance back only to find the Blade closer than ever, Tommy forgot to engage his magic for the next leap, and barely remembered to use it in time to catch his fall as he missed the next rooftop and stumbled into an alleyway below. The Blade dropped neatly after him, landing neatly on his heels, and Tommy spun around only to be met with a brick wall.

He was cornered.

He whirled around again, breathing hard from the exertion but prepared to fight his way out, scarlet magic swirling at his hands. His heart was in his throat, and he nearly choked on it; if he lost this fight, he lost everything.

Yet the Blade hadn't even drawn his weapon. Instead, his hands were in the air, gently outstretched — as if in a calming manner, but Tommy had more sense than that.

"Wait," the Blade spoke again, and then, to Tommy's surprise, took off his mask.

The eyes that met Tommy's gaze through his own makeshift goggles were familiar, the warmth in them one he knew well from seeing them all week. Techno.

"I don't want a fight," Techno said slowly, voice still too gruff to match the personality Tommy had grown used to, but calm nonetheless. "And I'm not going to arrest you. I just want to talk."

Tommy nearly opened his mouth to boldly question this, and stopped himself just in time. Bumping into Niki again had served as an effective reminder of the consequences of not being careful. He remained silent and on guard, staring the man down.

~~(It really sucked, actually, because he genuinely liked Techno as a person, but couldn't trust him. Especially not now.)~~

"I swear, it'll only be a moment," Techno was saying, hands still in their previous position.

He was waiting for him to relax, Tommy realised. Unfortunately, he didn't trust that this wasn't some ploy to get him to let his guard down. The Blade was ruthless, everyone knew that. Some of the rumours that circulated were nauseating; and though Tommy liked to think Techno incapable of such violence, as he'd said before, the Blade was a different person.

Techno seemed to take his silence as an invitation to speak, and despite the fact that magic was still burning in Tommy's hands, he loosened his own stance.

"I've received numerous reports of increased violence in the outer districts," Techno said, lowering his hands. "As I'm sure you're aware, heroes don't often patrol out here, so I don't have much information. However, vigilantes like yourself do, and it would be a great help to me if you could just tell me a few things."

Tommy didn't dare unclench his jaw. He didn't trust himself not to speak if he loosened up for even a second.

"And I know, usually the only business heroes have with vigilantes is arresting them, but I've never really liked that whole thing anyway, to be honest with you," Techno continued. "Unless they're doing real harm, I don't see an issue with letting them do their own thing."

He was rambling, Tommy noted. Techno wasn't fond of social interaction beyond the Watchtower, or even SBI, and despite his threatening appearance, Tommy found some satisfaction in recognising the fact that the Blade was a little nervous.

Techno was faltering at the lack of response. "C'mon, man, work with me here," he said, tone bordering on pleading. "Do you... talk?"

Tommy, wondering if this would be what sent him to hell, seized the opportunity. He let his magic calm, though remained tense, and with one hand pointed to where his mouth was beneath the mask and shook his head no.

Techno's eyebrows raised by a fraction; his expression was carefully controlled, but the surprise still registered.

"Oh," he said. "Um... sorry." He paused. "You can hear me, though?"

Tommy nodded, and tried to swallow his heart where it was pounding in his throat. He was one thin piece of cotton away from his identity being revealed and everything going to shit.

"Okay," Techno said slowly. Tommy could nearly see the cogs turning in his head as he struggled through the situation. "Well, um, have you noticed increased violence around? What's this, fourteenth?"

Tommy nodded, and thanked every god he could name that he could still recall some sign language from when he had stayed with a foster family years back with a deaf son. He made a clumsy attempt at the sign for fifteen, though to his relief, Techno didn't seem to recognise sign language enough to pick up on any mistakes.

"I don't... I don't know sign language. Um...."

Tommy instead put up all ten of his fingers, and then closed one fist, hoping that was understandable enough. Techno, after a moment, caught on.

"Fifteen? As in the fifteenth district?"

Tommy nodded. Karl had mentioned violence recently in his district, and while he didn't want to send heroes into the vigilante's territory, he knew Karl was capable of taking care of

himself, and would appreciate the help if things were truly getting bad.

Techno looked pensive. Tommy realised that his allegedly being mute and Techno's lack of knowledge of sign language severely limited the conversation — but that was probably all the better for him. The sooner Techno left, the sooner he could relax and then go vomit from how stressful this whole situation was.

"Alright. I don't think we'll be able to discuss much as it is," Techno finally conceded, and Tommy hoped his breath of relief wasn't audible. "But thank you anyway. I plan on patrolling the outer districts more often, so we might run into each other again soon."

Tommy's heart dropped.

"In the meantime, I'll brush up on my sign language, I guess," he added.

Tommy's heart dropped further.

Techno stepped back, turning to leave, but then paused. "You got a name, at least?"

Tommy shook his head firmly. He'd never bothered coming up with some sort of vigilante name, like the way Techno was called the Blade; he didn't see much point in it. And he certainly wasn't going to give the hero his real name either.

Techno stared at him, thoughtful. "Theseus," he stated.

Tommy stared back, struggling to contain a "*what?*"

Techno fixed his mask back into place, and gave Tommy a curt two-fingered wave. "Until next time, then."

Tommy did not wave back. He waited in the alleyway for another ten minutes before leaving, hoping to wait out the hero in case the Blade was planning an ambush around the corner. He did a wide circle of his apartment three times before deciding it was safe to slip back in through the window, after which he promptly crashed onto the mattress, thoroughly exhausted and dripping wet. Suit be damned; he'd take it off in the morning.

"You good?" the groggy, sleep-hoarse whisper of his roommate sounded in the dark.

Tommy groaned into his hands. "I have a lot of study to do."

A beat. "For... what?"

"Sign language."

Chapter End Notes

"author i'm picking up peter parker works at the avengers tower vibes" I WARNED YOU I WAS A MARVEL FIC CONSUMER SKDJDK /lh

now we're really starting to get into the plot ahhhhhhh !!! (and wilbur is starting to soften, even if he won't admit it)

News (and a New Bruise)

Chapter Summary

Tommy struggles to hide another injury. Meanwhile, Phil has an announcement for him.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for [notes](#)

Tommy was still only barely awake when he heard the growl of a car engine outside his apartment the next day. He hadn't been up long, sleeping well into the morning after his eventful patrol. He'd had a slice of toast and just finished getting dressed when his brain caught up with him and he remembered that it was probably Wilbur waiting outside to pick him up. He ignored the sinking feeling in his stomach, letting the nerves slowly shake him from his groggy stupor.

He slung his bag over his shoulder before stepping out of the door, mood lifting a fraction as he noted that the weather had improved considerably. And then he took in the sight of the car that was parked below on the street, and his jaw dropped.

Wilbur's car screamed money. Maybe it wouldn't usually look so shocking, among the widespread wealth of the first district, but against the dull, dirty streets of fourteenth, it stuck out like a sore thumb. It was low to the ground but large, with a spotless, shining grey paint job and blackout windows so you couldn't peer inside. Everything about it could have been brand new. Even the tires were clean, sporting the Watchtower's insignia on the fancy hubcaps.

The driver's door clicked open, and out stepped Wilbur himself. He, too, was out of place in fourteenth, even in his casual wear. His hair was too clean, too fluffy; his sweater was too bright; his ripped jeans were too intentionally ripped.

"Hey Tommy," he called in greeting, gazing up at the building with a critical stare.

Tommy wanted to sink into the ground. He was suddenly grossly aware of how shitty his living situation must have appeared to the man, who was used to the gleaming, glassy buildings of first. His ears were burning, mortified.

Wilbur, for all his expressionless staring, didn't say a word. Tommy was eternally grateful for this.

"You gonna come down?" the hero said instead, folding his arms.

"Oh — yeah, sorry," Tommy replied, kicking himself into action.

He hurried down the rusted steps of the apartment building's external stairway, and joined Wilbur in standing beside the car, a little afraid to dirty it by touching it.

Wilbur shot him an odd look. "What happened to your face?"

"What?" Tommy questioned, squinting at the man. "What's wrong with my face?"

Wilbur pointed to his own face, just below his left eye. "It's bruised."

Tommy's heart dropped like a stone. He whirled around to face the darkened windows of the car, examining his reflection carefully. Even in the dull colour of the glass, he could make out a dark patch blossoming from the side of his nose to his left cheekbone. *Oh, that fucker*; he thought bitterly, recalling the attempted mugger who had caught him with a fist to the face last night. There was an especially dark curve below his eye where his goggles had taken the brunt of the hit. *That absolute fucker.*

Wilbur was still staring at him expectantly. He swallowed hard.

"I tripped," he said, wincing at how weak the excuse was. "Got up for a snack in the middle of the night, all dark, y'know, and whacked my head off the doorknob."

Wilbur's face was impossible to read, but after a moment, the muscles in it seemed to relax. "You're awfully injury prone."

"Yeah, that would be me," Tommy agreed warily. "Clumsy as always."

Wilbur only pursed his lips, which did nothing to ease Tommy's nerves. He opened the passenger's door for the boy, and Tommy sat into the car stiffly, sure he would have been more comfortable in the back seat.

The inside of Wilbur's car was just as impressive as the outside. The cream leather seats were soft to the touch, and refreshingly cool compared to the warmth of the sun. There wasn't so much as a crumb on the floor, or anywhere, really. Two keychains hung from the rear view mirror; a cat and an anvil. The car as a whole smelled fresh, though the undeniable scent of caffeine lingered in the air. A collection of travel mugs around the driver's seat proved to be the culprit.

Wilbur sat in beside him, and waited until they were both buckled in before putting the car into first gear and pulling out onto the narrow road. Tommy fiddled his thumbs anxiously, now all too aware that this was injury number two he'd failed to hide from his employers.

"You live alone?" Wilbur asked, breaking the awkward silence.

"Hmm?" Tommy hummed in response, before the question registered with him. "Oh, no. I have a roommate."

"Same age as you?"

"A little older," Tommy replied, and then remembered that he was supposed to be eighteen. "He's twenty."

Ranboo was seventeen.

"Nice to have company around the house," Wilbur mused, though his tone lacked the optimism the words implied. "You two get along?"

Tommy nodded, and then realised Wilbur's eyes were on the road. "Yeah," he said aloud, and smiled to himself in amusement. "He can be a little strict sometimes, but he knows what's good for me, I suppose."

Wilbur only hummed in response. Tommy's smile fell.

"So, uh," the teen spoke up again, hoping to twist the conversation away from his private life, "you drive often?"

"Not really," Wilbur admitted with a shrug. "Don't have much reason to, most of the time."

Tommy raised an eyebrow at him. That explained the cleanliness, at least, but.... "How long have all these cups been in here?"

Wilbur let out a laugh at that. "Probably best I didn't say. You'd tell Phil, and he would kill me."

"That's so gross," Tommy said, wrinkling his nose. "There could be shit living in there, big man."

"I'll wash them out eventually."

"You'd better, or I *will* tell Phil," Tommy threatened with a grin.

Wilbur chuckled. "You're a gremlin."

"You're a bitch."

Wilbur shook his head in amusement. He reached for the button for the radio, then paused. "You mind if I put on music?"

"It's your car, Wilbur, do what you want."

Wilbur went ahead with the action, and lowered the volume a little as an admittedly catchy song began to sound from the speakers. Tommy didn't have the opportunity to listen to music very often, and smiled as he sat back, taking it in. Wilbur's fingers drummed along the steering wheel to the beat. Tommy was sure he caught him mouthing the words a few times, but he would stop immediately each time.

They didn't talk much after that, but the soft hum of music in the background made the lack of conversation comfortable. Tommy relaxed slowly into the situation, admiring the blur of buildings as they made their way from one district to another and laughing as Wilbur cursed out bad drivers. He hadn't been in a car in years, though he wouldn't admit that to the hero. It wasn't as bad as he remembered, and he wondered if the company made a difference.

Not that he thoroughly enjoyed spending time with Wilbur, or anything. Of course not. He just worked for him, and Wilbur wasn't horrible. That was all.

The pair finally pulled into the Watchtower (which had a ridiculously fancy underground parking area) forty minutes later, and took the elevator straight up to SBI's floor. Tommy quietly thanked Wilbur for the ride, and received a smile in response that might have been genuine, if Tommy didn't know any better. He did, though, and was sure it was a fluke. Wilbur didn't even want him around — he hadn't forgotten that.

Phil was in the living area when they stepped out onto the floor, and greeted the pair with a cheery wave, a mug in his other hand.

"Welcome back, Wil," he said. "And hello, Tommy."

His eyes narrowed, then, as Wilbur and Tommy drew closer, and Tommy swallowed hard, subconsciously rubbing the bruise on his face.

"Hit my head off a doorknob, before you ask," he explained, before Phil could so much as open his mouth. "Embarrassing, I know. You don't need to say it."

"I wasn't going to say embarrassing," Phil said, raising an eyebrow. "I was going to say it's an odd shape."

"So was the doorknob," Tommy said quickly. He wrung his hands nervously, keen to change the subject. "Where's the Blade at, hm?"

He didn't notice the quick glance Phil and Wilbur exchanged before Phil acknowledged the question properly.

"In his office; said he had some work to do." At Tommy's expression, he gave the boy a relaxed smile. "I'm sure he'd let you know if it was something he wanted your help with. Don't worry about him for now; besides, I have some exciting news."

"Ooh, spill the tea, Philza," Wilbur said jokingly, taking a chair at the table opposite the man.

Tommy sat down beside him, interest piqued as he looked at Phil expectantly. "What kind of news?"

"I've been called for a conference meeting down south," Phil announced, clasping his hands together. "Some of the council will be there, as well as a couple higher-ups who have business opportunities to offer the Watchtower."

"A business meeting," Wilbur said, expression flat. Tommy had to agree that the *exciting news* hadn't exactly been life-changing stuff. "With who?"

"Schlatt will be there, for starters—"

"Ugh," Wilbur groaned loudly, running a hand over his face. "Seriously? I hate that guy, he's such an asshole."

"Wilbur," Phil warned. "Be nice. Besides, you don't have to go. I was actually extending the offer to Tommy — I think it'd be a great opportunity for you."

Tommy met Phil's optimistic gaze with surprise. "Me? I'm still only new around here, is this kinda stuff not beyond me—"

"Nonsense," Phil said, waving away his concerns. "I promise you won't have to do much, but I thought you'd enjoy getting out of the Watchtower for a bit. There'll be some big names there, and you'll have the chance to put your name on the radar for future working opportunities, if you wish."

Tommy wasn't sure how to respond to that. "You're not trying to get rid of me, are you?" he said, half joking.

"Oh, goodness, no!" Phil said, eyes wide at the suggestion. "Sorry, that wasn't what I meant at all. I was just thinking — you know, you're a young man, and I'm sure you have aspirations beyond assisting us old heroes around the place."

"Old," Wilbur snorted. "That's just you, Phil."

Phil shot the man an unimpressed stare.

"I haven't really thought about any of that yet," Tommy admitted, trying to smother any visible relief. He didn't actually mind working at the Watchtower, despite having to keep up a rather large number of lies — he would be content staying there for a long time to come. "But yeah, I guess it would be cool."

Phil smiled at him. "Yeah, it'll be a fun trip for you, hopefully. I'll make sure you get your own hotel room and everything, and don't worry about paying for any of it, of course—"

"Hotel?" Tommy echoed, confused.

"Well, yes," Phil laughed. "It's a fair distance south, and I've got more than one meeting to attend while I'm there. We'll take the jet, of course, but it'll be an overnight stay even at that."

Tommy gaped at the hero, eyes wide. He'd never even set foot on a plane, never mind the *official heroes' jet* at the Watchtower. Okay, this might have made things marginally more exciting.

Wilbur chuckled at the boy's expression. "What, you've never flown before?"

"No, never," Tommy admitted, too shocked to give a witty retort.

Wilbur's eyebrows rose in surprise. "Oh."

Phil grinned at the blond. "I take it you're interested, then?" he said happily. "We won't be the only ones from the Watchtower going either, so don't worry about being stuck with me the whole time. Dream, George and Sapnap are all coming with us, and I'm going to invite Puffy, too."

"The *entire* Dream Team?! And the Captain?!" Tommy's jaw was beginning to ache, and he forced himself to close his mouth, eyes bulging in shock. "For real?"

"Absolutely," Phil said, grinning widely.

"Holy fucking shit," Tommy breathed. He glanced sideways at Wilbur, who was struggling to conceal a smile at his reaction. "An overnight trip with all the biggest heroes?"

"I wouldn't say *all*, not when I'm staying behind," Wilbur pointed out seriously.

Tommy stuck his tongue out at the man, only half aware of how childish the gesture was. Phil made a noise of amusement.

"Yes, they will all be there. You might recognise a few people we meet there, too, but the council aren't really much of a public group, so I wouldn't bet on it," Phil explained. "I won't have you do too much, so you'll have plenty of free time to explore and do as you wish. Just fetching coffees, and taking notes in a few meetings, small stuff."

"And... I don't have to pay for anything?" Tommy asked meekly, feeling a little guilty at having to ask the question. The trip certainly sounded exciting, that much was for sure, but if he couldn't afford to go, he couldn't go at all.

"No, of course not," Phil replied. "It's an official business trip, so any expenses are billed to the Watchtower's allowance. And you will still receive your pay."

Tommy glanced at Wilbur. "And you and Techno won't need me for anything?"

"We managed before well enough," Wilbur said with a shrug. "We'll manage again for two days."

Tommy ignored the implications that Wilbur still seemed to think he was an unnecessary presence on the floor. The hero literally could not complain, after insisting on driving him to work.

Instead, his thoughts drifted to Ranboo, and how his roommate would fare for a night without him. Sure, he was fine when Tommy went out on patrol, but Tommy was back in the mornings, even if he was usually fast asleep. And they always spent their evenings in each other's company; they had done so every day as far back as Tommy could recall. He frowned; Ranboo was well able to take care of himself, but he still felt obliged to ask him and make sure.

"Tommy?" Phil asked, having noticed his fallen expression. "Is something wrong?"

Tommy shook his head. "I'll just have to make sure it's alright with my roommate," he said, forcing a small smile back onto his face. He didn't notice Wilbur's gaze hardening at the words. "I'm sure it'll be fine, but he'd probably like to know before I up and leave."

"Not a problem, mate," Phil said kindly. "I don't leave for another day anyway, so you have a while to make your decision. The offer will be open until then."

"Thanks." Tommy grinned again. The whole Dream Team *and* Captain Puffy *and* Philza Minecraft? This trip was going to be the highlight of his life.

"You're very welcome," Phil said cheerily. "Now, shall we get started with the day?"

The hours before lunch passed quickly, Tommy's mind occupied with the idea of the trip. Even if it was just for business meetings or whatever, the thought of leaving L'Manberg for what — as far as he knew — was the first time ever was both intriguing and exciting. He wondered what the city down south looked like; were the buildings different? Was the weather different? Were the people? He couldn't wait to tell Ranboo.

Phil let him look at the hotel in which they'd be staying as they organised the finer details of the trip in his office, and Tommy felt his jaw drop again. The location looked like a summer vacation in the pictures online; and though sure, that was probably an advertising ploy, it only made him more enthusiastic.

By the time he returned to the living area for lunch, he was practically vibrating with excitement. He could feel his magic humming with energy beneath his skin, and forced it

down carefully, reminding himself not to get too worked up. The trip was still a day away, anyway; if he was this excited for that entire duration of time, he'd end up crashing before he could get on the jet.

Techno, at lunch, made an appearance at last. He seemed a little distracted himself, a hand fidgeting subtly at his side, though he paused upon seeing Tommy in the kitchen.

"Your eye," he stated bluntly.

Oh, yes. Tommy had completely forgotten about it.

"Had a run-in with a door," he explained casually, swallowing the spike of anxiety that followed Techno's observation. It was a smooth lie, he had been consistent in giving the same excuse to all of them, it was all fine. He bit his cheek as Techno glanced questioningly to Wilbur and Phil, though no words were exchanged.

"What have you been doing all morning?" Wilbur questioned the man, raising an eyebrow. "Brooding in your office?"

Techno rolled his eyes, and began working his way around the kitchen. "Something like that," he deadpanned. His hand continued to fidget at his side, and Tommy eyed it curiously.

Then it clicked.

"Is that sign language?" he blurted before he could stop himself, and his jaw snapped shut immediately afterwards, panicked regret rising in his throat.

Techno's hand stilled, and he glanced curiously at the boy. "Do you know it?"

"Nope!" Tommy said quickly, a nervous laugh escaping his lips. "Not a clue, big man. I have no idea how to speak it. Is it speaking? I dunno — um — just thought the shapes you were

making with your fingers were a bit odd to be fidgeting—"

Wilbur snorted, elbowing Techno as he moved past him to sit down. "Fuck are you learning sign language for?"

"Never said I was," Techno retorted, his stare chilly.

"Clearly you *are*," Wilbur argued, gesturing at his hand. "'Cause I know you didn't know it before, and why else would you be practicing now?"

Techno turned his back on the man, busying himself with sorting through the cupboard. "We need groceries," he muttered.

"Aww, embarrassed, Techie?" Wilbur teased, making a face. "It's not that big a deal."

"Stop antagonising him, Wilbur," Phil sighed.

Wilbur rolled his eyes. "I was just asking a question, he's the one being weird."

"It could be handy to know for missions," Techno grumbled, reaching further into the cupboard. "Um... Foolish mentioned it might be useful."

Tommy eyed the man carefully, surprised by the excuses Techno was giving. Was he... covering for him? He glanced sideways to Wilbur, who was raising an eyebrow at Techno. Maybe Techno didn't want Wilbur to know that he'd met up with a vigilante on patrol. Knowing Wilbur's history with vigilantes, that was probably a good call, to save his own skin if nothing else — but Tommy felt a rush of gratitude at the action. Techno was protecting him, too. He ducked his head, struggling to hide his smile.

At the same time, he made a mental note to start cramming sign language lessons as soon as he got home. If Techno had really dedicated all morning to learning it himself, he would

surpass Tommy's own knowledge in no time.

And that was just another thing — Techno had spent hours at the first available moment learning sign language for *him*. Well, not exactly for *Tommy*, but for the vigilante who *was* Tommy. Even under the mask, Techno seemed to care enough about communicating with him that he deemed it a priority. Part of Tommy wanted to curl up and cry, knowing he would have to face the hero on patrol again, but a marginally larger part of him was warm at the thought. That Techno cared. Sort of.

"Oh, Sam knows sign language," Phil piped up, and both Tommy and Techno turned to look at him in surprise.

"Really?" Tommy said, eyebrows raised. *There* was something the textbooks didn't mention.

"Yeah, mate," Phil said with a smile. "His enhancement creates explosions. Growing up as a child trying to harness those powers? He's almost fully deaf without his hearing aids."

"I knew he had hearing difficulties, but I didn't know he knew sign language," Techno admitted, seating himself at the table. "He never uses it."

"He doesn't have to, anymore," Phil explained. "He helped develop the current hearing aids he uses, and as I'm sure Tommy will vouch, his work is pretty impressive."

Tommy grinned; he most certainly would agree. He had to admit he was a little surprised by the information, though — in all he had ever seen or read about Sam, nothing was ever mentioned about his deafness. Almost as if it were something to be swept under the rug. He frowned at the thought.

"Plus he's basically a pro at lip-reading," Phil added. "But he was certainly fluent in sign language last I checked. You should ask him for help if you're interested in learning, Tech."

Techno considered this for a moment, contemplative. "No harm in asking, I guess," he said after a moment. "Provided he's not too busy."

Tommy pursed his lips. Of course Techno was going to get a personal tutor in sign, learning from Awesamdude himself — who was apparently *fluent*. That put a decent amount more pressure upon him to start cramming himself. Maybe Ranboo would be willing to help him out?

"Yeah, I think it'd be worth a try," Phil agreed. "And tell Foolish to try him as well, if he's the one who suggested this."

Techno visibly swallowed, and Tommy coughed into his hands, struggling to stifle a laugh. Techno could pretend to be all high and mighty as the Blade, but he was a useless liar. It was a miracle Phil and Wilbur hadn't picked up on it yet.

Though, to be fair, Tommy knew the truth in the first place.

"Yeah, I'll tell Foolish," Techno mumbled, before cramming food into his mouth to avoid further conversation.

"Hey, and maybe if it becomes useful on missions, we can implement it across the tower," Wilbur suggested with a casual shrug. "I wouldn't mind learning it anyway, it's a handy thing to know. I'm just a bit busy at the moment."

Tommy glanced at the hero, concerned. Nobody was supposed to be so overwhelmed with work that they had no free time; avoiding that was the point of hiring him. "Anything I can help with...?"

Wilbur shook his head with an almost amused smile. "No, it's patrol stuff. Me and Fundy are still tracking down that vigilante from seventh; he's proving to be a real menace."

Tommy tried not to let his face fall. Quackity was the only vigilante he knew who patrolled seventh, and though sure, the man was involved in a few shady deals here and there, he was all-in-all a good guy.

"D'you really *need* to catch him?" he found himself asking meekly. "He's not doing anything bad, is he?"

Wilbur shot him a strange look. "He's a vigilante, Tommy, that alone is against the law. Prime knows what the fuck else he's done."

Tommy didn't say anything else. Neither did Techno, who had become very interested in his lunch. Tommy felt an unspoken, secret alliance forming between them, even if only he was aware of it.

It was comforting to know that not *everybody* in the tower wanted every vigilante in the city locked up.

Even if Wilbur did, which kind of hurt.

He shrugged down the mild sting at the thought, and reassured himself that everything was all good — none of SBI knew he was a vigilante, none of them even had suspicions, and he had a trip outside L'Manberg to look forward to coming up soon.

Things were good. Maybe he needed to be a little more cautious about hiding his bruises, but they couldn't be too hard to cover up. He would figure it out.

Yeah, things were going to turn out fine.

Chapter End Notes

so that passerine animatic, huh
i rlly cried all over again thank you sadist

anyways, i hope you enjoyed this chapter! it was just a little on the shorter side, but i didn't want to drag it out too much :)

The Southern City (part one)

Chapter Summary

Tommy leaves L'Manberg for the first time in the company of the Dream Team, Phil, and Captain Puffy.

TW// mild descriptions of violence

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for [notes](#)

Ranboo, as it turned out, was almost more excited for the trip than Tommy was. His eyes had grown huge as Tommy told him all about Phil's offer, from the hotel to the heroes who would be accompanying them.

"Primes, Tommy, that's incredible!" he had exclaimed, eyes lighting up. "You'd better call me while you're over there, I want to hear all about it."

"Every spare moment I have," Tommy had promised, grinning. "And... it *is* alright with you if I go, yeah?"

"Dude, of course," Ranboo said. "That's the opportunity of a lifetime; if you *don't* take it, I'll kill you."

Tommy had laughed. "Alright, alright. You sure you'll manage a night all alone?"

"Primes, I could use a break from you," Ranboo snorted. "Kidding, of course. I'll be perfectly fine, man — don't worry about me."

"If you say so," Tommy said. "And you can call me at any time, too, if you need to."

"Of course, Tommy." Ranboo smiled. "Can I help you pack?"

"Yeah, you'll probably remember all the important things," Tommy said with a grin. "As long as we get it done before patrol."

Ranboo had glanced at him tiredly. "You're not still patrolling tonight, are you?"

"Uh, yeah, of course I am."

"Tommy...."

"Hey! I'm always careful, don't look at me like that."

Ranboo continued to look at him like that.

"Alright, fine, I'll take it easy and cut it short," Tommy sighed. "But I'm not skipping patrol altogether. I won't be able to tomorrow night, so I have to go today."

Ranboo huffed, crossing his arms, and Tommy grinned. He knew he had won.

"I'm not gonna be happy about it," he had said slowly, pinching the bridge of his nose. "But I guess I can't stop you. Just... take it easy. Like you said."

"Of course, Ranboob. Always do."

In fairness, Tommy had done his best to take it easy that night. He really hadn't planned on getting into any big fights (despite knowing that if he came across one where someone was in real trouble, he would have joined the fray without hesitation). It was the criminals who weren't cooperative.

He had intercepted what was quickly becoming a violent argument between a group of three and what appeared to be a young couple; the three were all armed with knives, which were just loads of fun to watch out for in a fight. It wasn't even the knives that got him, though, which was the worst part. He was pinning the third of the group to the ground, cuffing their hands with zip ties, when one of the couple had attacked him from behind.

He couldn't even curse aloud as rough hands grabbed around his neck and arm; because for one, he was being choked and couldn't breathe, and two, he had been making an effort to stay as silent as he could on patrol since running into Techno. Primes, all it took was a video of him in action while running his mouth, and not only would the mute vigilante thing fall to pieces, but SBI would recognise his voice instantly, having to listen to him ramble all day. That was not about to happen. As upsetting as it was to abandon his witty quips and sharp-tongued insults, keeping his secret held far more importance.

(It was Ranboo, who had pointed out all that to him. During their first study session of sign, which was more a crash-course revision class of the basics, he had mentioned that Tommy couldn't afford to be chatty while in costume. They had to wrap up all the loose ends.)

But all the same, *"what the fuck, man?!"* was at the tip of his tongue as he was wrenched backwards. *I just fucking rescued you!*

It hadn't taken too long to get them off, using his new trick of pushing his magic into their hands to leave them with an uncomfortable burning sensation. Still, his throat felt crushed even as it was let free, and he struggled to inhale for several minutes afterward, only relaxing as he apprehended and cuffed the traitorous couple, too.

Dickheads, he thought bitterly, and wished he could voice that much to the pair. Unfortunately, all he could do instead was glare through his goggles and move onto the next fight.

He winced at the achy pain in his neck and arm each time the muscles stretched, all too aware of the bruises that he was going to have as a souvenir from the encounter. He made a mental note to actually check them in the morning this time, ideally before walking straight outside and letting Wilbur see them in all their glory. Yeah, completely avoiding that from here on out was the plan.

His bag was all packed that morning. It was left with a kindly worded note from Ranboo, who had already left for work, as he usually did before Tommy woke up. The boy had apparently added a couple other things after they'd packed it together before Tommy's patrol, and though it still felt just as light as it had before, Tommy opened it to find a chocolate bar and a freshly-made sandwich in a small lunchbox inside.

I know you're too proud to ask Philza to order you food, the note had read, among other things. Have fun on your trip, and don't forget to call!

Tommy smiled fondly at the kind gesture, reminding himself to thank Ranboo for that when he called him later.

He pulled on a turtleneck sweater as Wilbur pulled up outside, after wincing at the dark bruises that wrapped around his neck and upper arm. These were most definitely hand-shaped, and there was absolutely no way in hell he was letting anyone see them. There was no excuse to save these ones.

Thankfully, the sweater worked well in hiding them, as Wilbur mentioned nothing about them when Tommy descended from his apartment. He smiled to himself. Things were going to be okay.

Phil was rushing all around the place when they stepped off onto the floor, and Wilbur raised an eyebrow at the man in amusement.

"All morning to pack, and you still left it to now?" he teased.

Tommy snorted. "You still haven't packed?"

Phil paused in the middle of his speed walk around the floor, acknowledging them with an unimpressed glance. "I'm nearly done packing, mind you, Wil," he said, and then cast a curious glance at the small bag in Tommy's hand. "Do you have all your things, Tommy?"

Tommy blinked. "Yeah? It's just one night, right?" *Was I supposed to bring more?*

"That's true," Phil mused, returning to his own packing as he hurried back to the living area.

Techno was sitting on the couch, flipping casually through a large book. Wilbur peered over his shoulder as he passed by him, though wrinkled his nose in distaste at whatever the hero was reading, before continuing on his own way. Tommy chuckled to himself, waiting in the doorway.

"I feel like the printer is unnecessary," Techno called, without looking up from his book. Phil paused again, in the middle of attempting to fit a relatively compact but still large printer into a suitcase. "They'll probably have their own, if you even need to print anything."

Phil pursed his lips, deep in thought. "I suppose... but what if—"

"Phil, leave it at home."

"Alright, alright."

The elevator door opened again, and Tommy turned in surprise to see Captain Puffy entering the floor. Despite running into her before his interview, he still felt a little awestruck as she approached the group, especially as she shot him a cheerful grin.

She wasn't dressed as casually as the other heroes, though wasn't quite donning her usual pirate-esque suit, either. She wore a neat open blazer over a white top, and her pants were tailored for her sheep legs. Puffy was certainly one of the more iconic heroes in the tower, with her significant hybrid characteristics, but even her enhancement was one of a kind; Puffy was a sort of living lie detector. If she had any physical contact with you, she was capable of determining whether or not there was truth behind your every word. This served the tower well for interrogations, as rare as they were, but was also a handy skill for the woman in general.

Yeah, Tommy would probably have to be careful around her.

"Heya, Tommy," Puffy greeted him happily. "Great to see you again. All ready for the trip?"

Tommy, shaking himself out of his stupor, raised his bag with a cheesy smile. "Got everything right here."

Puffy's gaze lingered a second too long on the small bag, though her expression remained cheery. She stepped further into the living area, cloven hooves tapping against the tiles. Techno glanced up from his book, acknowledging the woman with a nod.

"How's it going, Tech?" she greeted. "I see Phil is busy."

"He's overpacking again," Techno reported with a shrug. "Don't know if he's got clothes in the suitcase yet, but half the tower's already in there."

Puffy laughed. "I'll set him straight," she said with a grin, before glancing back at Tommy. "The Dream Team is already on the roof, Tommy, if you'd like to join them. As soon as Phil gets his stuff sorted, we can actually get this show on the road."

Tommy ignored the fluttering of butterflies in his stomach at the thought of being alone with the Dream Team (hell, even with Dream himself — who was only *the* number one hero), opting instead to eye Phil curiously as the man dashed back across the floor.

"I didn't take Philza Minecraft to be the type who packs his bags last minute," he joked.

Techno snorted. "You'd be surprised. He really just pretends everything is under control, most of the time."

"Don't we all," Puffy said with a laugh, before heading after Phil. "Go ahead if you want, Tommy, we'll be right behind you."

"Yup," Tommy said, though didn't move.

Techno stood, gently shutting his book, and approached Tommy. The boy glanced up at him, unsure, but the hero just lay a hand on his shoulder and smiled through his tusks.

"Have a good trip, kid," Techno said, before he nodded and headed away to his office.

At the same time, Wilbur hurried around the corner again, making his reappearance. "Leaving already?"

Tommy shrugged. "I guess we are."

The curly-haired man blinked, thoughtful. Almost gingerly, he took a step closer, and ruffled Tommy's hair with an outstretched hand. If Tommy's eyelids fluttered and he subconsciously leaned into the brief touch, surprised by how warm it felt, he would take the fact to his grave.

"Yeah, enjoy yourself," Wilbur said as he withdrew his hand, and the small smile he offered the boy was genuine. "If Schlatt bothers you at all, feel free to punch him and tell him it's from me."

Tommy, still a little fuzzy from the action, had to shake himself out of his daze. "You — uh — you two don't get along?"

"Wouldn't call myself a fan, we'll put it that way," Wilbur said, making a face. "Don't let that worry you, of course. The city down south is really nice. You'll have fun."

"I'll hold you to that," Tommy warned him playfully.

"Gremlin," Wilbur said, and grinned. "See you tomorrow."

The two gave each other a brief wave, before Wilbur was busying himself across the floor again and Tommy was facing up to the elevator. He pressed the highest button available as the doors closed behind him, bag in hand.

He was headed to the roof. To see the Dream Team. Alone. Okay, maybe he got some shakes out in the elevator ride up — whether from nerves or excitement, he wasn't sure.

The Dream Team was the most elite trio in the Watchtower — and probably the entire country, too, thanks to Dream's status as the number one hero. They were fearsome to face up against individually, but as a team, they were an unstoppable force. Tommy liked to think that SBI wasn't far behind them, with both the Blade and the Angel of Death — and Wilbur, he supposed — but that didn't make convincing himself to play it cool any easier.

The doors were opening far sooner than he was prepared for, though the view he was met with was breathtaking. Primes, if he'd thought the sights from the windows of floor eighty-seven were impressive, this was on another level. The city stretched out for miles on all sides, buildings shining in the morning sunlight as far as the eye could see. If he had binoculars, he could probably make out the individual buildings of fourteenth and find his apartment.

"Nice view, isn't it?"

Oh, right. The Dream Team was also up here; how that had slipped his mind even with the distraction of the cityscape, he wasn't entirely sure. Yet there they were, three incredibly dangerous men leaning casually against the side of the heroes' jet in day-to-day wear. Yeah, there was no stopping this jaw-drop.

Sapnap, the one who had addressed him, grinned at his reaction. He was an enhanced elemental, like Niki was; though unlike her careful control over water, Sapnap had the insane ability to create and manipulate fire. He could create flames out of thin air, and grow the smallest sparks into raging infernos in seconds. He was insanely powerful, as his enemies would vouch; though there weren't many who would dare challenge a master of fire.

George, Tommy had already bumped into when he, Sam and Phil were creating his new suit. The mage looked almost odd in his casual wear; today he was donning a teal t-shirt and jeans in contrast to his usual flamboyant style. Tommy noted with amusement that the man's iconic white clout goggles were still atop his head, the one part of his suit that he just couldn't leave behind him.

And then there was Dream.

Dream, the number one hero.

Dream was an enigma in many ways; for one, just as he did at that very moment, he wore a full face mask everywhere he went. There were few who knew what he truly looked like beneath the rounded face covering, and the rumours ran rampant as a result. Tommy suspected Sapnap and George had seen his face, as his teammates, but even if they hadn't, he wouldn't be terribly surprised. Dream was a very private individual.

The second thing was that Dream was not enhanced.

That was one thing that the public really struggled to wrap their heads around; because *everyone* nowadays had powers of some kind. Every single other hero was at the very least a hybrid of some kind, if not a magic-user or an elemental, yet the number one hero was *human*.

There was much debate over this aspect of Dream as well. Many believed he was lying for more attention, or to make his feats all the more impressive. Yet Tommy couldn't find reason for it all to be a lie; Dream's reputation preceded him, one just as menacing and deadly as that of the Blade. He had also seen the YouTube videos of the hero in action — as rarely as he was sent out, reserving his raw skill for the big fights — and there was nothing to suggest an enhancement was at play. The man was just insanely well trained, and had a ruthless mentality that took no hostages. Some said he was too cruel, but there was a reason he was so successful.

If Dream had even noticed Tommy's presence on the roof, it wasn't made obvious.

"Yeah, the view is pretty cool," he stammered out at last, smiling at Sapnap. "I don't think I've ever been up so high."

"You're about to be even higher, in this bad boy," Sapnap said with a grin, patting the jet where he leaned against it. The vehicle was imposing, for sure, not necessarily huge compared to passenger planes, but certainly more high-tech. "You flown before?"

"Nope."

Sapnap smiled. "It's not too bad. Smoother than a car ride, though your ears might pop."

Tommy made a face. "Nothing I can do to stop that from happening, ey?"

"I've got chewing gum," George piped up, fishing into his pocket.

He pulled out a small pack, and stepped forward from the jet, hand outstretched. Tommy crossed the roof, meeting him halfway and taking a piece gratefully. He was half tempted to save it and put it in a box somewhere. *404's chewing gum*.

"Tommy, right?" George asked, and managed a small smile.

"Ayup," Tommy affirmed, grinning.

"This is the kid who helped Sam with my suit," George called back to Dream.

The green-clad man perked at being addressed, and his head turned towards the pair, smiley mask hiding any true expression. Tommy found it frustrating, not being able to read him. Then Dream was casually pushing himself off the jet and stepping forward to meet them, and Tommy's heart jumped into his throat.

"Hello," he said, nearly choking on the words.

Dream's head tilted to the side a fraction. There was silence, and for a moment Tommy thought that was all he would be getting out of the man, but then Dream was holding out his hand as if to shake.

"Hey, Tommy," his voice sounded from beneath the mask. "I've heard a bit about you."

"R-really?" Tommy shook the man's hand quickly before he froze up too much to do so, stumbling over his words and sure the handshake was far too tense and fast-paced to be normal. Whatever, he was literally interacting with *Dream*.

"Yeah, Sam seems pretty impressed with you," Dream replied nonchalantly. "You work for Phil, right?"

"Yeah," Tommy breathed, barely registering the question. He didn't bother correcting the man that he technically worked for all of SBI; he supposed Phil was the team leader anyway.

Dream gave a subtle nod. He didn't make any further conversation, and Tommy didn't push his luck, trying to firm every detail of the past few moments into his memory forever. He was itching to call Ranboo already.

The elevator returned to the top level again, and Tommy breathed a quiet sigh of relief as Puffy and Phil approached them, both smiling pleasantly. Phil was carrying at least three bags; Puffy had another two.

"Well prepared as usual, Phil," Sapnap joked, raising his eyebrows at all the luggage. "What emergencies are we prepared for this time?"

Phil rolled his eyes in amusement, not dignifying the question with a response. He smiled at Tommy, and then his gaze lingered, as if seeing him for the first time all day.

"Are you wearing that?" he asked, smile polite.

Tommy glanced down at his turtleneck defensively. "Is it ugly?" he asked, confused. He wasn't going to change regardless, but he was caught off guard by the question.

"Oh no! It's lovely, mate," Phil corrected himself quickly, looking a little guilty, "it's just that it's gonna be pretty warm where we're going. I thought you might want to wear a t-shirt."

"I'm okay," Tommy said quickly, and pulled at his sleeves. "I, uh, get cold pretty easy."

"I can warm things up for you, if you want," Sapnap offered, producing a flame in his hand.

Tommy watched the fire flicker with wonder, eyes wide. Holy shit — he'd never seen Sapnap use his enhancement in person. Well, he'd never seen Sapnap in person either, but watching him create the flames with such ease right in front of him was beyond impressive. Primes, he had so much to tell Ranboo already, and they weren't even on the jet.

"It's okay," he managed to get out, struggling for words.

Sapnap closed his fist, and the fire extinguished as soon as it had appeared. Tommy was grateful for this, as he was actually incredibly warm under the turtleneck already and certainly did not need any more heat.

"Let's get this show on the road then, shall we?" Puffy said pleasantly, clapping her hands together. "You already have your bags in, do you, gentlemen?"

"Yes," George responded. "Do you need a hand, Phil?"

"I'm alright, George," the older man insisted, though Tommy stepped forward and took one of the suitcases from him anyways. He did work for the guy, after all.

Phil smiled gratefully at him, and Tommy returned it.

Dream, meanwhile, was lowering the ramp into the jet for the group, who filed in one by one. Tommy's eyes grew huge as he stepped up into the jet's interior; it too felt bigger than his apartment, fitted with seats and seatbelts on both sides and plenty of room for baggage overhead. There was a good deal of floor space between the walls of the jet, which Tommy supposed was for carrying heavier or larger cargo. In the corner was a sort of emergency area, with numerous drawers, shelves and first aid boxes on the walls, and a stretcher, which was tied in place. The cockpit, up front, had two plush leather seats in it and more buttons and levers and screens than Tommy knew what to do with.

"Wow," he said aloud, stuck in place at the centre of the jet as he took it all in.

Phil nudged him with a friendly smile, directing him towards the seating and quietly taking his bag back to put away himself.

"Better buckle in, mate," he suggested, as Puffy and Dream took their respective seats in the cockpit.

Tommy took a seat opposite Sapnap and George, and Phil sat down beside him after putting his bags away. Then the ramp was slowly lifting and the engines were purring, the entire vehicle vibrating gently as the power grew. Tommy couldn't help the bounce of his leg as he braced himself against the seat. He flinched in surprise as Phil placed a hand over his on the armrest dividing them, though relaxed into the contact, smiling at the man. It was comforting, actually.

"Once we're in the air, it'll feel like nothing," the older man promised, returning the smile.

The power continued to grow all around them, the entire jet trembling with the force of it. Tommy could hear the bags lightly bumping against each other above him, though they were muffled by the whirl of the engines kicking into the next gear. He bit his cheek nervously, sparing Phil a grateful glance as the man brushed his thumb over the back of Tommy's hand in a rhythmic, grounding motion.

And then the whole vehicle lifted, and Tommy grabbed the armrests a little more firmly at the odd sensation of becoming airborne. The vibrations did indeed lessen as the jet climbed higher into the air, at least. Puffy and Dream were murmuring back and forth to one another, and then the former put on a pair of sunglasses and headphones and pulled down on the controls, sending the jet steadily forward.

"Primes," Tommy breathed, struggling to relax his muscles as the jet settled into a smooth pace. He noticed both George and Sapnap chewing gum opposite him, and pulled out his own piece (though judging by the uncomfortable pressure in his ears, he had a feeling he was too late).

"See, that's not so bad," Phil said, smiling. He didn't retract his hand, though, and Tommy didn't complain. "You'll get used to it."

"Is this what it feels like when you fly?" Tommy asked curiously.

Phil grinned. "Not quite. When I fly on my wings, there's a lot more wind, usually." He laughed. "But there's more control involved, too. It takes more focus, and is probably a lot less safe than this."

Tommy couldn't imagine flying regularly. Even now, the vague feeling of weightlessness had completely thrown off his balance, and he was sure that if he wasn't sitting down he would have toppled.

He did eventually relax into his chair, and though Phil said he could take off his belt for a while if he wanted, he happily remained firmly strapped in for the entirety of the short flight. It wasn't long before the jet was slowing to a hover once again, and Tommy braced himself as it began to lower, though the jolt as they touched down wasn't as hard as he'd expected.

Phil handed him his own bag and one of the many that he and Puffy had packed as the ramp lowered. Tommy followed the man out into the sunshine of the southern city, and swallowed as the heat touched him, wondering what it would take for him to regret wearing the turtleneck.

Heat aside, the city was wonderful. They had landed atop another tall building, though it wasn't the tallest, either, judging by the few other skyscrapers dotted around. The shorter buildings weren't as glassy or dull as those in L'Manberg, most of them built from a pale yellow stone with completely flat rooftops. There was more greenery, too; almost every building had plants in their windowsills or hanging from baskets on the walls. It was a warm city in every manner of the word, and a little smaller than L'Manberg, as in the distance he could make out the rising hills that surrounded the cityscape.

"Still cold?" Sappnap teased him.

Tommy had a feeling his cheeks had already gone red from the sun. "Not exactly," he admitted with a reluctant grin.

The group was greeted by a blond man dressed in a light white suit, a gold chain hanging from around his neck. He approached them with a wide smile.

"Dream and company?"

"That's correct," Dream spoke up, stepping forward to shake the man's hand. "You must be Punz."

"Indeed I am," Punz replied with a nod. "If you'll follow me, I will escort you around the council building. My coworker, Ponk, will take your bags and bring them straight to your hotel for you."

"Thank you, Punz," Phil said gratefully.

Punz led them inside a glass door, which allowed access to a large elevator. The group just about managed to squeeze in, and Tommy grit his teeth as someone leaned heavily for a moment against the bruise on his arm. Thankfully, his discomfort went unnoticed.

Punz brought them to the ground floor first, where Ponk was waiting dutifully with carts to carry their bags. Phil parted ways with only four of the five, insisting he needed the contents of the last one for meetings, and Tommy convinced the man to let him carry it around, at least.

The building was incredibly fancy for a council building. Marble pillars held up tall ceilings, and Tommy had yet to see so much as a speck of dust. Punz escorted them up a few floors once their luggage was taken away, and the group stepped out onto a wide, open-plan floor filled with tables and chairs. It reminded Tommy of a food court in a shopping centre; he recognised a few familiar chain restaurants and cafés lining the sides of the huge room, as well as a couple new ones. There wasn't a large crowd present in the room, but there were still numerous groups of people sitting down eating or milling around; probably also there for the meetings.

"I'll have your schedules down to you within the hour," Punz explained, waving them out onto the floor. "For now, please refresh yourselves after your journey."

Dream nodded curtly to Punz, and the white-clad man returned to the elevator, disappearing behind closed doors.

"What do you want to eat, Tommy?" Puffy asked him with a smile, and Tommy was caught off guard.

"Me? Um — I don't mind, actually, you guys can pick. I'll eat whatever."

"We don't all have to order from the same place," Puffy told him, gesturing to where the Dream Team was already heading off towards the food vendors. "So it is up to you, actually. I'll go with you."

Tommy blinked, glancing to Phil. "Shouldn't I be the one getting food for Phil—"

"Mate, I know you work for me, but I'm still capable of ordering my own food," Phil laughed. "I'm not that old. Puffy will pay for whatever you want — using the Watchtower's card, so don't worry about it being too expensive."

"Okay," Tommy stammered, turning towards the vast selection of restaurants.

There was almost too much choice; most of these places he had seen before around L'Manberg, but could never afford to try. He swallowed hard, already sweating under his sweater. The interior of the building was kept cooler than the outdoors, but he was still far warmer than he was comfortable with. He glanced to Puffy as Phil headed off alone.

"Um... you have any recommendations?"

Puffy shrugged. "Me personally, I'm vegetarian, so you might not agree with my tastes," she mused with a smile. "But there's a nice sandwich place over there. Their stuff at least *tastes* healthy. Whether it is or not... well. Fast food is never that reliable."

Tommy made a noise of amusement, and followed the captain over to the counter of said sandwich place. Puffy must have been a regular, as she recited her order with ease; Tommy just pointed at the first thing he saw on the menu that looked okay and asked for that.

Puffy lay a hand on his shoulder as they waited for the workers to prepare the sandwiches, and Tommy tensed, recalling all of a sudden her enhancement. He wondered vaguely if this was some sort of set up by Phil to have the woman ask him questions. His heart rate was increasing rapidly; SBI was hardly suspicious of him already, were they? He'd been so careful, he was sure he'd covered his tracks well, except for just the two injuries. He pulled at his sleeves again, the heat under his turtleneck worsening.

"How do you find working at the Watchtower?" Puffy asked conversationally, and Tommy relaxed. Maybe this wasn't an interrogation after all.

"It's really cool, actually," he admitted, and the smile that followed grew all on its own. "I was a bit nervous for a while, I guess, with all the heroes and stuff — but it's kind of fun. There's so much that goes on behind the scenes that I had never considered. It's really interesting."

"I'm glad to hear you like it," Puffy said cheerfully. "Phil's a decent man, too, so I trust he's not overworking you."

"Definitely not," Tommy laughed, spotting said man across the room getting his own food. "Sometimes it feels like he's nervous to put me to work at all, even though it's my job."

"Yeah, that sounds like Phil alright," Puffy laughed. "And if you ever do have any issues, feel free to come and talk to me if you need to."

"Thanks," Tommy said, smiling at her. To his great relief, then, one of the workers behind the counter brought over their sandwiches and Puffy's hand slipped from his shoulder to step forward and pay.

He'd probably been overreacting, anyway. It wasn't like Puffy shouldn't be allowed to touch off of anyone because of her enhancement, and the questions she'd been asking came from a place of genuine curiosity and easy conversation, not to interrogate him. It was all good.

They found the table where the Dream Team and Phil were all seated, joining them with their trays of food. George and Sapnap were chatting amiably amongst themselves, while Phil was making small talk with Dream. The winged man glanced up as Puffy and Tommy seated themselves at the table, grinning at the pair.

"All good, Tommy?"

"Yup," the boy replied honestly, smiling back at him as he unwrapped his sandwich.

Phil and Puffy fell into easy conversation, then, and Tommy sat back into his seat, relaxing into the laid-back atmosphere of the room. He pulled his phone from his pocket to shoot Ranboo a quick text that he'd landed safely and everything was going well, and put it away again just in time to tune in as a new voice spoke up.

"Afternoon, everyone."

Tommy glanced up to find that two new people had approached the table. The first, the one who had spoken in a subtle southern drawl, was the most imposing. He wore a grey business suit with a startling red tie, though most notable were the curled horns that protruded from the sides of his head. His smile was wide but pointed and performative, and Tommy felt a tug of unease in his stomach.

The second figure was a good deal shorter and younger than the first, his forearm held tight in the horned man's grip. He too wore a suit, though it was a bit crinkled at the edges, and his blue tie hung a little loosely around his neck, as if he didn't know how to tie it correctly. His brown hair was long and fluffy, though needed a brush in some places. He did not smile.

"Ah, Schlatt," Phil greeted the horned man with a nod, though his voice seemed to lack its usual cosy warmth. "And this must be Tubbo."

So this was Schlatt. Tommy had known the man for all of three seconds, but already he understood Wilbur's dislike for him; Schlatt gave off a vibe that was generally untrustworthy. *A true businessman*, he thought dryly.

"Yes, this is my son, Tubbo," Schlatt introduced, tugging the boy closer to the table. His dark eyes landed on Tommy curiously, glittering with an emotion Tommy couldn't read. "Around the same age as your own son, Phil."

Tommy met the man's stare coldly, shoving down the odd sensation that rose in his chest at Schlatt's words. "I'm actually Phil's assistant," he corrected him. "And I'm eighteen."

"Tubbo's a little younger than him, then," Schlatt mused, and finally tore his gaze away from the blond. "I didn't know you hired assistants, Phil."

"Tommy's a hard worker," Phil stated, meeting Schlatt's gaze evenly. "He's been a great help."

"I see," Schlatt murmured, the corners of his lips rising. "And I suppose you pay him very well, of course. The Watchtower is hardly cheap."

"The details of an assistant's work are hardly vital to you, Schlatt," Puffy said carefully, eyeing the man.

"One can be curious," Schlatt said casually. "I could be in need of my own assistant soon."

Tubbo shifted uncomfortably at that, and Tommy's glare softened, falling on the boy. Tubbo met his gaze for a split second, before his eyes returned resolutely to the floor.

"I'll send you the details, then," Phil said, and picked up his knife and fork again, as if to make the point that they had been in the middle of something before they'd been interrupted.

"Thank you," Schlatt said, voice silky. "I look forward to our meeting later on. I have a great many things to discuss."

"I'm sure," Sapnap mumbled under his breath, and George busied himself with wiping his mouth with a napkin to hide his smile.

"Until then," Schlatt said, nodding to the group. His eyes lingered on Tommy for a second longer, before he turned on his heels, dragging Tubbo after him.

"Creep," Puffy muttered, watching the pair leave through narrowed eyes. "I look forward to that meeting being over."

Tommy had to agree. He wasn't sure what he'd been expecting from Schlatt, given Wilbur's words from earlier, but he was a far less likeable character than Tommy would have thought. He frowned, watching the man tug Tubbo along by the wrist, before they disappeared behind a group of people and were out of sight.

If there was one thing he'd picked up from the brief conversation, it was that he wouldn't trust Schlatt as far as he could throw him. And with his magic, he could throw people pretty far.

Chapter End Notes

this one got so long but i didn't want to cut it off at a weird point so now it's casually 6k words dkshfkjd

next chapter should be a more exciting one as we delve into the plot some more ;)

The Southern City (part two)

Chapter Summary

Tommy meets a familiar face while at the council building, though something seems to be amiss.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for [notes](#)

Punz returned with each person's schedules just as they were finishing up their food, distributing them between the group. Tommy peered into Phil's timetable curiously; the man had three scheduled meetings for the rest of the day, the first with the council and the second with Schlatt.

Tommy and Dream accompanied him to the first meeting, Punz escorting them to one of the higher levels of the building while George, Sapnap and Puffy attended to whatever was on their own schedules.

The council, as Phil had told him before, was indeed made up of a bunch of unrecognisable faces. The meeting was fairly dull; Tommy introduced himself to the posh and wealthy group at the beginning, and Phil threw in a few nice words about the boy, smiling at him. He supposed this was what Phil considered an opportunity to put himself out there, though he didn't think he'd ever enjoy working with anyone on the council as much as he enjoyed working with Phil. There was a nearly pompous air about them, from the way they held themselves to the words they used in discussion.

There weren't many notes to take, either, as it was mostly debate taking place between the council and the two heroes. Tommy let himself zone out, trying to ignore the stifling heat of the room from all the hot air people's mouths were producing. It was teetering on unbearable under his turtleneck; though everyone else in the room was dressed formally, their clothes were light and made for the warm weather. Tommy's only item of clothing that would cover both his new bruises was a heavy sweater.

After what felt like a decade, the meeting finally came to a close and they rejoined the other three heroes on a lower floor. They didn't have much time for a break, Schlatt's meeting with

all five heroes scheduled immediately, though they took their time travelling to the room where the horned man was waiting for them, which Tommy appreciated. Puffy threw an arm around Tommy's shoulders as they walked, though didn't say anything, and he relaxed into the touch, if a little surprised by the gesture.

Ranboo would never believe him, that *Captain Puffy* was casually holding his shoulders like you would a good friend. He smiled to himself at the thought of his friend's reaction.

Eventually, the group couldn't drag it out any longer, and filed into the meeting room one at a time. Cruelly, the only windows were thrown open, allowing the stifling heat of the outside to chase out the refreshing cool of the indoor shade. He pulled at his sleeves, grimacing, though reminded himself that he couldn't give in and change into something lighter. Puffy shot him a concerned glance as they seated themselves around the table, though he waved it off with a reassuring smile.

Schlatt was seated at the head of the table, smirk ever present on his face as the heroes made themselves comfortable. Tubbo sat at his side, shoulders held tall but head ducked down. Tommy stared at him for a moment, hoping the boy might look up, but his eyes remained glued to the floor.

"Welcome, gentlemen," Schlatt greeted them, making a dramatic hand gesture that made Tommy's nose wrinkle. "And lady, of course."

Puffy's closed off expression didn't change at all.

This meeting was about as interesting as the last, if not less so. Tommy spent a while hoping that Tubbo would look up — for a brief moment, at least — but the boy seemed to want nothing to do with the business being discussed. Tommy didn't really blame him; any time he did tune in, he grew so incredibly bored that he could have dozed off. Still, he hoped he could at least smile at him, to assure the boy that he wasn't the only one bored out of his mind. But Tubbo never moved.

Tommy eventually gave up on getting the boy's attention. It was becoming more and more difficult to focus on Tubbo, anyway — or Phil, or Puffy, or the meeting in general. The heat under his sweater was building and building, and even when he inhaled, hoping for cool air, it was warm, and his chest felt tight.

It was when black spots began to sway at the corners of his vision, he realised he needed to find some sort of relief immediately, before he passed out on the table.

He pushed up his sleeves just enough that they still covered the bruise on his arm, shaking out his wrists under the table. Nothing improved. It was his whole torso that was burning up under the woollen fabric, and subtly, he tried tugging at the collar, trying to ventilate himself a bit better.

He noticed Puffy's eyes on him far too late.

"Tommy," she murmured lowly, placing a hand on his arm from where she sat beside him, "are you okay?"

Tommy let go of his collar in an instant, panic flaring as he met the woman's concerned gaze. *Fuck, fuck, fuck* — *did she see?* Schlatt and Dream were continuing to speak loud enough that the attention of the others was held, but Phil spared the pair a worried glance from Tommy's other side.

"Y-yeah," Tommy replied quietly, but her hand was on his arm, and she was going to know, and *fuck*, he was literally on the verge of blacking out from the heat. He needed to leave. Now. "I need to go to the bathroom."

He pushed himself up from the table, stumbling a little as his vision swam. Puffy stood too, but he shook his head vehemently.

"I'm alright, I know where it is," he assured her.

He could feel the eyes of the whole table on him as he hurried towards the door, and he glanced back for a split second, finally catching Tubbo's gaze. Then he squeezed out into the hallway, and relished in the cooler temperature, as fractionally lower as it was.

He had seen the sign for the bathroom on their way down the hall, and made a beeline for the room. If there was one thing he could count on being cold, it was the good ventilation of the bathroom and the tap water.

Tommy staggered in the door, leaning gratefully against the cool marble sinks as he pulled up his sleeves as high as they could go. The bruise on his arm peeked out from under the sweater, and he winced at the deep purple hue, pulling one sleeve a little lower to hide it. Just in case.

Splashing water on his face and forearms was the most relieved he'd felt in hours, and he heaved a long sigh, content in the feeling as his body began to regulate its temperature again. Primes, he didn't know how he was going to go back to that room. He didn't know how he was going to continue with the trip at all.

Ranboo was right, as always. Should have skipped patrol.

He was still splashing water onto his arms when the door creaked open, and he pulled down his sleeves in an instant, head whipping warily towards the door. His eyebrows knitted together in confusion as he noticed who it was that had entered the room, however.

"Skeppy?"

The blue-clad man glanced up in surprise, freezing in the doorway at the sight of Tommy. Primes, Tommy hadn't seen Skeppy in *ages*. When he had worked at Bad's, Skeppy had been a regular visitor — he was a close friend of Bad's, and so would stop by frequently to support the business and spend some time chatting with his friend. As a result, Tommy had gotten to know Skeppy pretty well; he had regularly worked the register, and would happily make small talk with any customer, especially the regulars.

But in the last week before the place had been destroyed, Skeppy hadn't shown up once. Tommy hadn't seen him since, and made no effort to contact the man, mostly because he didn't have any way of doing so.

Yet here he was, standing in the bathroom of the council building with a cardboard carrier of six coffees in hand.

"Tommy," Skeppy greeted stiffly. "How are you—"

"How am I? How are *you*?!" Tommy asked incredulously, stepping closer to the man. "It's been so long, Primes — have you heard anything about Bad? Any news? Is he okay?"

"Why would I know anything about Bad?" Skeppy snapped, and Tommy froze in place.

"I just thought — you two are such good friends, and I haven't heard anything for ages—"

"Well, neither have I," was the cold reply from the man.

Tommy felt his heart sink, and he bit his cheek hard. He'd thought that, out of everyone, at least Skeppy might have heard something about Tommy's old boss. But clearly, he hadn't, and Bad's disappearance must have fucked with him even more than it had Tommy, because Tommy had never seen the man in such a poor mood.

"Sorry," he said quietly, taking a step back. "I was just... nevermind."

Skeppy shot him an unfriendly look, brushing past him to place the carrier of coffees on the counter beside the sink. Tommy watched him uneasily, still shocked by seeing the familiar face for the first time in so long.

"What are you doing here, anyway?" he asked, not yet ready to return to the meeting.

Skeppy glared at him. "Using the bathroom? What else?"

"No, I mean — what are you doing in the council building? In this city?" Tommy said, pushing his luck and pressing for more conversation. "Do you live here? What—"

"I started working for Schlatt a while ago," Skeppy said shortly. "You probably know him—"

"Yeah, I do."

Skeppy rolled his eyes, and then leaned forward, examining himself in the mirror. Miniscule crystals glittered from various spots on his face, dotted around his skin; he was a sort of elemental hybrid.

And he seemed to be waiting for something, Tommy noted, glancing back at the coffees.

"So if you work for Schlatt, are those for him?" he asked, pointing at the cardboard carrier.

Skeppy's head whipped around to glare at him. "That's none of your business," he snapped, anger flaring in his eyes.

Tommy met his gaze defiantly, though wondered vaguely if the man's brown eyes had always looked so... red. Something about the entire situation was really off-putting; between Skeppy's odd behaviour and the drinks that he'd brought into a bathroom, of all places, something wasn't right.

"I was just asking because I'm in a meeting with Schlatt at the moment," he said carefully. "So if you want, I could bring the drinks to him."

Skeppy turned back to the mirror, exhaling a huff. "No, I'll do it. It's my job."

"Mine too, technically," Tommy challenged him. "Especially if the drinks are for everybody at the table."

"You weren't asked to fetch the drinks, I was," Skeppy said, tensing. "So I'll get them. You can head back to the meeting now."

"Why'd you bring them in here?" He wasn't going to back down now.

"Because I needed to use the bathroom, and now you're distracting me," Skeppy seethed. "So run on, Tommy."

Yeah, that wasn't going to happen. Tommy forced himself to relax, offering the man a neutral smile. "It's alright, I can watch them for you while you do your business," he suggested lightly. "Make sure nobody steals them, or tampers with them."

"You don't need to—"

"I will, it's no big deal."

Skeppy scowled at him. "Fine. But if *you* tamper with any of them, I'll know about it."

He jabbed an accusatory finger at the boy, and then whirled around, storming into one of the stalls.

Tommy wasted no time in quietly investigating the cups. Skeppy wasn't behaving like himself at all, for starters, but he was being weirdly defensive about the drinks, and Tommy couldn't rid himself of the odd feeling that he'd been waiting for Tommy to leave to do something to them. As he slowly removed, studied and replaced each coffee cup from the carrier, taking care not to make any noise, his suspicions were finally confirmed.

Well, sort of.

Two of the drinks had subtly been marked with a small *P* just under the lip of the plastic lid. Tommy's heart was pounding in his chest, unsure of what the letter could mean. He carefully popped off the lid of one of the marked drinks, examining the contents, though the coffee looked and smelled quite normal. He was about to put the cup back and open a normal one for comparison when the stall door was flung open and Skeppy stepped out, face contorted in anger.

"Did you even flush—"

"I *knew* you were going to mess with them!" Skeppy shouted, storming over to Tommy.

The blond stepped back nervously, though his back hit the sinks behind him immediately and panic flared as Skeppy made a grab for his wrist.

"What did you do to them, huh?!"

"I didn't do anything!" Tommy yelled back, struggling to free his arm from the man's grip. His magic was beginning to surge through his body, and he tensed, preparing to fight his way out if necessary. "Fucking let me go!"

The bathroom door was flung open with a bang. Both Skeppy and Tommy froze, heads turning to see Captain Puffy standing at the entrance to the bathroom, fury in her gaze and fists curled.

"Let him *go*," she said slowly, voice low with barely concealed rage. "*Now*."

Skeppy dropped Tommy's wrist with a scowl, and Tommy glared daggers at the man. He snatched the carrier of drinks from the countertop and stalked past Puffy, muscles tensed in anger.

Puffy shot him a fearsome glare as he passed her, and waited for the bathroom door to close before she hurried over to Tommy, the fury draining from her face.

"Are you okay?" she asked, worry taking the place of rage as she held him gently by the arms, searching his expression. "He didn't hurt you?"

"No, I'm fine," Tommy replied honestly, still glaring over her shoulder at where Skeppy had last been. "But Primes, he's become some prick since I last saw him."

"You know that man?"

"Yeah, his name's Skeppy," Tommy answered. "I used to work for a close friend of his. But..." he paused, recalling the marked drinks with a flare of concern. He could have been overreacting, but his gut feeling was uncomfortable and urging him to tell someone about it. "Puffy, I've never seen him act like that before—"

"Like what? What happened?" the woman asked urgently.

"He was so rude, and angry," Tommy began, and then cut to the point. "And I think he put something in your drinks. Or was going to."

Puffy faltered, eyes widening in surprise. He could see the gears turning in her head, but he knew himself that his words were truthful, and her enhancement confirmed as much for her.

"Go on," she encouraged him.

"He said he was bringing coffees to the table for everyone, but he brought them into the bathroom, which I thought was weird," Tommy reported, as quickly as he could. Said drinks were still on their way to the table, in Skeppy's hands. "Then it was like he was waiting for me to leave. So I convinced him I would mind the drinks while he did his business, and I obviously checked them while he wasn't looking. Two of them had the letter *P* written on them."

Puffy took in this information slowly, biting her lip in concern.

"I couldn't see or smell anything odd about them," Tommy added. "And — well, I wasn't going to try and taste them, just in case. Then he caught me, and accused me of tampering with them — I swear on my life I didn't, Puffy, I was just worried—"

"Hey, Tommy, it's okay," Puffy assured him. "I know you're telling the truth. I believe you."

Tommy's relief was palpable. He'd almost forgotten Puffy was holding onto his arms, and startled a little as she let go, straightening.

"What are we gonna do?"

Puffy inhaled slowly. "I'm going to tell Phil," she said decisively, "and then have a word with Schlatt, and... Skeppy, was it?"

Tommy nodded.

"Okay," Puffy agreed, nodding her head once. "Nobody's gonna drink anything until we've cleared this up. Thank you for telling me, Tommy."

"I'm just lucky I came across him," Tommy mumbled, trying to stifle the warm pride that rose in his chest at her genuine gratitude.

"Let's hurry back, then," Puffy said, and Tommy followed her as they returned at speed to the meeting room. The heat that greeted them at the doorway served as a reminder of why Tommy had left in the first place, and he lingered in the hall as Puffy fetched Phil from the meeting.

The man seemed quite alarmed as Puffy shut the door behind them, glancing in surprise at Tommy.

"Is everything alright?"

"Tommy had an encounter in the bathroom just now," Puffy explained, and quickly retold the story to the winged man, whose face fell further at the words. "He thinks the drinks could have been tampered with."

"Primes," Phil breathed, expression caught between heavy worry and shock. "So what do we do?"

"I'm going to speak with Schlatt," Puffy said seriously. Her face was slowly returning to the menacing expression it had taken on when she'd first entered the bathroom. "You should stay out here with Tommy. I'll sort things out."

"Thank you, Puffy," Phil said with a grateful nod, and the woman reentered the meeting room, a wave of heat left in her wake before the door slammed shut.

Tommy let out a breath he hadn't been aware he was holding.

Phil turned to him, eyes soft but concern heavy in their gaze. "You alright, mate?"

Tommy nodded, still staring at the doors to the meeting room. "Yeah, big man, I'm fine," he said quietly. And then, after a moment, "I haven't seen Skeppy in weeks, and I had thought... maybe he'd disappeared too, along with Bad. But then today, and he...."

"Hey, shh, you're okay now," Phil murmured softly, and stepped forward.

Arms gently pulled Tommy into a warm embrace, and the boy froze in surprise at the motion. Then feathers were gently tickling the back of his head as wings wrapped around him too, and he let himself accept the hug for just a moment, gingerly bringing up his own arms. It was surprisingly comfortable, and he let his head rest on the older man's shoulder, eyes

closing for a second. Then the warmth started becoming a little difficult to bear in his sweater, and he pulled away, almost reluctantly.

"Okay, that's enough physical contact for me, old man," Tommy joked, though smiled gratefully at Phil.

Phil returned it. "You did good, Tommy. Thank you for speaking up about it — Prime knows what might've happened had you not intervened."

Tommy let out a shaky exhale at the thought. "Yeah," he agreed. "You don't think Schlatt set him up to it, do you?"

Phil glanced at him in surprise. "Do you?"

"Skeppy said he was working for Schlatt now," Tommy explained with a shrug. "He didn't say who sent him for the drinks, but I can only assume...."

Phil hummed in contemplation. "I'm sure Puffy will sort it out, regardless," he assured the boy. "If anyone can get to the bottom of things, she can."

On cue, the doors to the meeting room opened, and Sapnap and George stepped out into the hall, faces grave. Another moment passed, and Tubbo stumbled out after them, looking severely uncomfortable. Tommy didn't miss the angry, raised voices that sounded from the room before the door swung shut again.

"Hello," Tommy greeted Tubbo cautiously.

"Hi," the other boy returned, a weak smile forming as he fidgeted with his blazer.

Phil glanced between the pair, contemplative. "Tommy, how about you and Tubbo get to know each other for a bit?" he suggested lightly. "I have a few things to discuss with Sapnap

and George here."

Tommy glanced at Tubbo curiously, who shrugged in response. He turned back to Phil. "Sure."

As the adults crowded closer together, voices low and hushed, Tubbo stepped closer to Tommy, if a little hesitant.

"Tommy, right?" he spoke up, voice a little shaky.

"Ayup. And you're Tubbo," Tommy responded with a smile.

Tubbo nodded.

"So Schlatt's your dad?" Tommy asked bluntly, and Tubbo nodded again. "Oh, sorry. Wait, I mean—"

"It's okay," Tubbo said, smile widening. "He probably looks intimidating to strangers."

"Yeah, you can say that again," Tommy snorted. "So why don't you have horns like him?"

Tubbo glanced downwards in discomfort. "I do," he admitted quietly, "but I... I'm not exactly proud of them."

He parted and pulled down his hair enough to show Tommy the two small bumps atop his head. They hadn't grown in much, but enough that his hair was pushed up awkwardly to cover them, giving it the messy appearance Tommy had noticed earlier.

"Woah," Tommy said, whistling. "Well, I think they're cool. You ought to make them your own, y'know? They don't have to be like your dad's."

Tubbo seemed surprised by the comment, and perked up a little. "Really?" he said, smile growing.

"For sure," Tommy said with a grin. "I think they look poggers."

And Tubbo actually laughed at that, a light, happy sound. Tommy grinned even wider, proud of himself.

"Poggers," Tubbo echoed cheerily. "I like that. Thanks, Tommy."

"No problem," Tommy said. "So have you lived here your whole life?"

"Yeah, pretty much," Tubbo replied. "It's just been me and Dad almost as long as I can remember. We've been other places, too, but only on trips and stuff."

"You go on trips often?"

Tubbo shrugged. "I guess. Dad goes somewhere every few months, but I don't always go with him."

"Have you ever been to L'Manberg?" Tommy asked, intrigued.

Tubbo smiled. "Of course! L'Manberg is the coolest. Dad has a second office building there, so we visit pretty often."

"Really? That's so cool," Tommy said with a grin. "I can't imagine having two places in two different cities."

"Yeah, I guess it's kinda cool," Tubbo agreed. He looked at Tommy curiously. "You're from L'Manberg, then?"

"Born and raised there," Tommy said proudly.

Tubbo laughed lightly. "I had a feeling."

Tommy raised his eyebrows. "What gave it away?"

"Nobody dresses like that from the south," Tubbo said, gesturing to Tommy's sweater. "You've gotta be boiling in that."

Tommy pulled at his collar. "I am," he admitted with a cheesy grin.

"You can have my blazer, if you want," Tubbo offered, already unbuttoning the piece of clothing. "I know it's still got sleeves, but it's way lighter—"

"Oh, no! It's okay," Tommy said hurriedly, stopping the boy in his tracks.

"I really don't mind," Tubbo insisted. "And if you're worried it'll look dumb without an undershirt... okay, well, it might, but less dumb than wearing a jumper like that in this weather."

"Oi," Tommy joked, though he had to admit, he was half tempted to take the boy up on his offer. He reminded himself why he couldn't. "I can't, but thanks, Tubbo."

Tubbo made an odd face. "Why not?"

"My neck's kinda fucked up at the moment," Tommy admitted quietly, and had to immediately swallow bitter regret — why the fuck had he just said that to the son of Schlatt?

But Tubbo was so surprisingly easy to trust. Case in point, he made no big deal of the confession, only offering Tommy a comforting smile.

"Oh, I'm sorry to hear that," he murmured. "You don't have anything else to cover it up, do you?"

"No," Tommy mumbled, pulling at his sleeves. "What, you think I picked the warmest thing I own for fun?"

Tubbo laughed. "Maybe. You could be a weirdo, I don't know you very well."

"Not yet," Tommy found himself saying, a grin reforming fast on his features.

"Yeah," Tubbo agreed, his own smile spreading from ear to ear. "Not yet."

Tommy's magic tingled in his chest, and his heart sang at the bubbly feeling that was happy and comfortable without choking him. There was something in the making here, he thought cheerfully. A new friendship was being kindled, and he revelled in its warmth.

Chapter End Notes

check out my sbi suit designs [here!](#)

also! would anyone be interested if i made a discord server for the fic? i've never made one for a fic before, nor have i been in one for a fic, but i've seen a few people doing it and i thought it might be fun so i get to chat with you guys on a more personal level, and

give you updates and that! it wouldn't have to strictly be discussion about the fic either, ofc - more so just friendly chatting <3 let me know if you would join or if you have any thoughts!

The Southern City (part three)

Chapter Summary

Tommy spends his last moments in the city with his new friend. Phil and Puffy have a talk.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for [notes](#)

The rest of the day passed relatively quickly after the incident with Skeppy, and Puffy and Phil stayed close to Tommy as they moved from one place to another, constantly checking in with him. It was nearly irritating, but the reminders that they genuinely seemed to care for him were, in some part, welcome. He had always had Ranboo to fall back on for support, but two top heroes? It was a very different situation, but not one he found himself disliking.

The heat, too, never got as bad as it had been in Schlatt's meeting room, and though Tommy was sweating floods beneath his sweater, it was manageable. Puffy, who he suspected knew he was overheating, kept him well hydrated throughout the day, providing him with bottled water. That helped.

He didn't see Tubbo again after parting ways with him, though he knew he'd find the boy again the next day, even if it took a thorough search of the building. He felt a little bad, leaving him back with Schlatt. Tubbo didn't look the most comfortable nor happy with his father, but he had assured Tommy that he was alright and would see him tomorrow. And so, the two had said their goodbyes, hopeful at the prospect of the blooming friendship between them.

Phil, Puffy, Tommy and the Dream Team finally left for their hotel as the sun approached the horizon, bathing the city in a warm orange glow. The cool air of the evening was relief unlike any other as Tommy stepped outside onto the street, and he sighed happily, energy well spent after the long day.

"Tired?" Phil had asked with an amused smile as they waited for their ride.

"No," Tommy said, yawning.

The two cars that pulled up were literal limousines, and Tommy gaped at them as he realised that they were here for the heroes. For him, too. If he had thought Wilbur's car was fancy, well... this was something else.

The Dream Team sat into one of the limos, and Phil and Puffy into the other, while Tommy stood stock still on the footpath, a little awestruck.

"Come on, mate, you're with us," Phil called him gently, stirring him from his daze.

The leather seats were plush, and the vehicle smelled of fresh roses and champagne, which was a curious mix. Indeed, whoever was seated beside their chauffeur passed a bottle of said alcohol into the back seat, along with three glasses. Phil poured the drink out carefully, which wasn't too difficult given how smooth the road was, and passed a glass to Puffy, who accepted it gratefully.

"Would you like some, Tommy?" the man asked politely.

Tommy was technically underage.

"Absolutely," he said, grinning wide. Phil didn't need to know he was only sixteen.

Then he took the glass to his lips, and nearly choked — because what the fuck, champagne tasted like *shit*.

Phil stifled a laugh at the boy's reaction.

Tommy grimaced, trying for another sip, but the unfamiliar sensation of fizzy liquid burned his mouth and throat, and he coughed again, sticking out his tongue.

"Is that what champagne is supposed to taste like?" he managed weakly, making a face.

Puffy chuckled, sipping contentedly at her own glass. "It's nice."

"Haven't you had champagne before, Tommy?" Phil asked.

"No," Tommy admitted, leaving out that he'd actually never tried any alcohol before. It was far too expensive, and he and Ranboo were both underage, anyway.

"Here, give me your glass, then," Phil said in amusement. "I'll finish it."

The drive to the hotel was a short one, and though Tommy had seen pictures of where they were staying online, seeing the building in person was completely different. He stared out the window in awe as they pulled up to the five-star place, vaguely aware that his room here for the one night probably cost double his rent.

The interior was even more impressive; the huge room that was reception boasted not one, but two glittering crystal chandeliers, and every inch of the place was spotless. The couches and carpets were a brilliant white, the wooden floors and desk polished to perfection. Two grand staircases curved up behind the receptionists' desk, joining together to lead up to the higher floors. Down the wide, well-lit hallway to the left, Tommy could see what seemed to be a refreshments room of some kind. There was an actual, real-life chocolate fountain in there, on a table filled with the widest selection of desserts he'd ever seen.

"Holy shit," he whispered, and Sapnap laughed at him.

Dream checked them in, handing out a key card to each person of the group before they were led to their rooms. They were all on the same floor, their bags waiting for them in their respective rooms. Tommy was between Phil and Puffy, which he thought was ironic, given how clingy the two had been all day already; even now, the two approached him before he could so much as open the door.

"Dinner will be served to the rooms, if that's alright," Phil explained with a smile. "They have a menu for you inside, so order whatever you want; it'll be billed to my Watchtower card. You can get room service, too, if you want it."

Tommy wasn't entirely sure what room service even entailed, but he nodded anyway, knowing he would probably get neither.

"Seriously," Phil said, fixing him a knowing look. "Everyone else will be ordering food, too, so I won't even notice. Plus, it's not exactly my money."

"Alright," Tommy sighed, deciding he would think about it.

"And if you need anything, we're both right here," Puffy added. "Doesn't matter the time of night."

"Yes, just knock if you need something," Phil agreed with a nod. "We'll head back to the council building at nine in the morning, so get up whenever you'd like before then, and get yourself breakfast, if you want it."

Tommy nodded, feeling rather like a child being prepared for being left home alone for the first time by his parents. At least, that's how he imagined such a situation would go.

"We'll see you in the morning," Phil said at last, and nodded to the boy with a smile. "Goodnight."

"Goodnight, Tommy," Puffy chimed in.

"Goodnight," Tommy responded, smiling at them both. *How oddly domestic this all feels, for an employee.*

His room was just as breathtaking as the rest of the hotel had been. It was definitely bigger than his apartment, and boasted far more facilities for a bedroom alone. There was a huge, well padded double bed at one wall, and a small table and chair set-up on the other side of the room, another bottle of champagne left on the table. A mini-fridge was stood in the corner, next to a radio; a flat-screen TV was hung on the wall opposite the bed, and a walk-in wardrobe was tucked into the other corner of the room, next to the ensuite. Two glass doors that passed off as windows so well that he had not noticed them at first opened out onto his own balcony, and he leaned against the railing, breathing in the moment. The city stretched out below him, glowing in the sunset.

Primes, I would live here so happily for the rest of my life, he thought to himself. If only Ranboo could see it all.

The thought of his roommate reminded him to pull out his phone, and he tapped on the older boy's contact. The phone only dialled once before Ranboo picked up.

"Tommy! Primes, I thought you'd never call—"

"Sorry, big man, I was busier than I thought I'd be," Tommy laughed, grinning at the sound of his friend's voice. "I have *so much* to tell you, you're not gonna believe any of it."

He wasn't sure how long he spent recounting the many events of the day in great detail to his roommate. If he made things out to be a little more dramatic than they should've been, he wouldn't admit it.

"Primes, and did you ever find out if the drinks were poisoned?"

"They definitely were," Tommy replied. "Though Puffy never told me what went down with Schlatt. She came out with this scary smile on her face, and I couldn't tell what Dream was feeling, obviously, with the mask and all, and Schlatt was just white as a sheet, I bet he's terrified of her—"

"Puffy," Ranboo echoed.

"Yeah, that's still who I'm on about," Tommy said. "Keep up, Ranboob—"

"No, I mean, you called her Puffy, not Captain Puffy," Ranboo pointed out.

Tommy blinked, confused. "Yeah? Everyone does."

"All the heroes do," Ranboo reminded him. *"I didn't know you were on that level already."*

Tommy rolled his eyes in amusement. "You haven't met her, man. It would be *weird* if I kept calling her Captain; she's so chill."

"You seem to trust them."

"Of course I do. They're heroes, after all."

There was a heavy pause. *"I know, Tommy,"* Ranboo said, sounding almost reluctant. *"Just... you're a vigilante, and Prime knows what would happen to you if they found out. They'll turn on you fast."*

Tommy bit his cheek. Ranboo had a point, of course; as much as he liked the heroes, he really couldn't afford to get too comfortable. "Yeah," he said quietly. "I promise I'm being careful, big man."

"I know you are," Ranboo replied, and Tommy could hear the small smile on his words. *"Have you eaten yet?"*

"Yeah, just not dinner. Thanks for packing me food, by the way," Tommy added with a grin. "I'll probably have that now."

"I knew you'd need it," Ranboo said, amused.

"How are you doing home all alone?" Tommy asked, tone almost teasing. Almost. He still felt a little guilty about abandoning his roommate.

"The apartment has never been so quiet," Ranboo said with a laugh. There was a brief pause. *"It is a little lonely, though. I can't wait for you to come home tomorrow."*

"Me neither," Tommy said. "The city here is cool and all, but it would be a lot cooler if you were here with me."

Ranboo chuckled. *"Send me loads of pictures of everything."*

"Oh, definitely," Tommy agreed with a grin. "My hotel room is insane, man. And I have it all to myself! It's crazy."

"Enjoy it while you can," Ranboo said with a laugh. *"You'll be stuck back here with me before you know it."*

Then there was a knock on the door to the room, and Tommy glanced back in surprise. Was Phil already checking in on him? It wasn't like it had been that long already, and there wasn't much trouble he could get into left alone.

"I might have to call you back later," Tommy said to Ranboo, stepping away from the balcony. "Someone's at the door."

"That's alright, Tommy. I'm probably gonna turn in for the night soon anyway," Ranboo said. *"Don't forget to revise your sign before you go to bed."*

Right, of course, Tommy thought in amusement. He had to ensure the Blade didn't surpass him in his knowledge.

"I won't," he promised. "Night, Ranboo."

"Night, Tommy."

The face who greeted him at the door was neither Phil nor Puffy, nor was it anyone on the Dream Team, or anyone he recognised at all. It was one of the workers in the hotel, a trolley filled with food pulled along after them.

"TommyInnit?" they inquired.

"Yeah, but I didn't... order anything," he finished hesitantly, as the worker placed a warm dish of pasta into his hands.

They were moving on again before Tommy could speak another word, leaving him bewildered, standing in the doorway holding a plate of pasta and whatever sauce had been served with it. He had to admit, the smell was mouthwatering.

A note was attached to the edge of the plate, and he picked it up curiously.

Not sure what kind of food you would like, but I hope this is okay —Phil.

His chest swelled at the gesture of kindness, knowing full well he probably never would have ordered his own food. He felt half tempted to visit Phil's room and thank him himself, but decided against it, gently shutting the door and placing the plate on his table. He scarfed down the food, which tasted remarkably good, and then wandered around his room a little more. It felt odd, not to be preparing for patrol.

He opted to hang up the two shirts he'd brought in the wardrobe, pulling on his pajama top and relishing in ridding himself of the turtleneck. He spent a little while admiring the spacious bathroom, too, and upon discovering that the mirror lit up if you touched it, decided that exploring the functions of the shower were necessary, but a job for the morning.

He set his alarm for seven, and then triple checked it before settling into bed. It felt comically large, and soft to the point of discomfort; he wasn't sure he could actually sleep on a surface so yielding. Regardless, he knew he'd have to try, so after a while of bouncing around on the mattress, he pulled out his phone and found another sign language video on YouTube to lull him into unconsciousness. He dreamed of giant hands speaking to him, too large and loud to understand, and then later of a familiar figure standing in his room, at the edge of his bed.

That part of the dream had felt a little too realistic to be entirely comfortable with. He shrugged it off regardless in the morning, letting it fade into the collection of other forgotten pieces of dreams in the back of his mind.

Seven was a lot earlier than he usually woke up, but Tommy shot out of bed at the sound of his alarm, determined not to be late and eager to start the day. He had Ranboo's packed food for breakfast, and then spent a while in the shower, messing around with the numerous fancy settings, scented shampoos and actual hot water.

Primes, he would shower three times a day if that was what his own shower was like.

It was Phil who eventually came knocking on his door to fetch him before nine. Tommy opened the door to greet the winged man, though paused as he took in his appearance.

"You, uh, have a little something," he said, pointing at his own jaw line. "This sort of blue mark on your face?"

Colour rose in Phil's cheeks, and he rubbed at the mark subconsciously. To Tommy's surprise, it didn't smudge at all.

"Yeah, I think it's printer ink," Phil said, not quite meeting Tommy's gaze. "I saw it this morning. Thanks for telling me, though."

Tommy had the odd feeling that wasn't the entire truth, but didn't push it. A secret about a blue stain on your face wasn't even in the same league as the secrets Tommy kept. Phil could have this one.

They were driven back to the council building shortly afterwards, though had to bring their bags with them as they wouldn't be returning to the hotel. Though this was a bit of an issue for Phil, Tommy didn't mind, as his backpack weighed barely anything. It was probably going to make his back sweat, though, especially as he still had to wear the turtleneck.

To his great surprise, the first face that was waiting for them as he stepped out of the limousine was Tubbo's.

"Tommy!" the boy exclaimed happily, practically bouncing on his heels.

"Tubbo!" Tommy returned just as enthusiastically, darting forward to greet the boy. "How are you, big man? Where's your dad?"

"He has a bunch of meetings today that he doesn't want me listening in on," Tubbo explained happily. "So I'm free all day! D'you wanna hang out? I can show you around the city!"

Tommy faltered, glancing back at Phil in question. He knew he was supposed to be working, but the idea of spending the rest of the day with Tubbo and exploring the city was a tempting one to entertain.

To his eternal gratitude, Phil only smiled kindly at him.

"Of course," Phil said. "I'll manage the rest of today on my own, it's not too busy. Just be back here for four o'clock, okay?"

"You're the best," Tommy said with a wide grin. "I'll see you later?"

"Yes, see you later, Tommy."

"Come on, come on!" Tubbo exclaimed, tugging lightly on Tommy's arm away from the doors to the council building. "I know all the best places around here, just you wait!"

Tommy laughed, waving over his shoulder to the heroes before running along after the boy. Tubbo didn't take him too far before slowing to a stop, beckoning him into a narrow alleyway between two buildings.

Tommy raised an eyebrow, but followed regardless. "You're not mugging me, are you? I don't have anything worthwhile."

Tubbo laughed. "Obviously I'm not gonna mug you. We're friends."

Tommy grinned, his chest swelling with warmth at the words. Tubbo was reaching for a pocket inside his blazer, and eventually withdrew his hand, producing a square piece of thin green fabric. It had a pretty white swirly pattern on it, and though the edges were a little frayed, it was in otherwise good condition.

"I got you something," Tubbo said happily, shoving the fabric into his hands.

Tommy took it, albeit a little hesitantly. "Thanks, but... what is it?"

"A bandana," Tubbo said with a wide grin. "You said your neck was a bit fucked up yesterday, so I got you something to cover it up. That way you don't have to wear that jumper everywhere."

Tommy's eyebrows rose in surprise. He examined the bandana curiously, the warm feeling in his chest lingering. Tubbo had got this for him? And they barely even knew each other. Primes, had the kid ever had other friends?

"I — wow, big man. Thank you," he said genuinely, a little shocked by the gesture.

"I brought you here so you could change," Tubbo said, smiling contentedly. "Do you have another shirt, or do you want my blazer?"

"I have a shirt," Tommy said, slipping off his backpack.

He fished out the thinner material from his bag, and then turned his back on Tubbo as he quickly changed, hoping the bruises weren't visible from behind. If they were, Tubbo didn't say anything. Tommy paused as he went to wrap the bandana around his neck, unsure of how to tie it.

"Um... can you help?"

"Sure," Tubbo said lightly. "Turn around for a sec?"

Tommy bit his cheek, uncertain, and then did so, bowing his head in shame. Tubbo spared the bruising on his throat a quick glance, but said nothing, neatly folding the bandana to hide the dark colouring and tying it securely around his neck.

"There you go," he said, smiling up at Tommy.

"Thanks," Tommy murmured, and then froze in surprise as Tubbo threw his arms around him, pulling him in for a brief hug.

"I hope you got them back, whoever did it," Tubbo said, withdrawing after a moment. He was still smiling, and Tommy returned it.

"Yeah, I did," he said with a grin. "Just don't tell Phil or Puffy. Or any of them, actually."

Tubbo laughed, and led the way back to the main streets once again. "As if I have the guts to speak to them in general," he said. "The heroes in L'Manberg are the biggest in the whole country. How do you manage, spending all day with them?"

"I dunno myself," Tommy laughed, walking alongside him. The difference that the lighter clothing made was massive, and he sighed in relief, letting the light breeze keep him cool. "They're all just people, I guess. Really cool people, yeah, but they're nearly normal when you get to know them."

"That is so — *poggers*," Tubbo said, and snickered at the word. "Do you have any powers like they do?"

Tommy swallowed; he had definitely told Tubbo too much already. As much as he would have loved to show his magic off to the boy, he knew he had to be more careful. "No, I'm... just human."

"Well that's alright," Tubbo said. "Humans can be very cool too."

"Yeah, like Dream."

"Or like you," Tubbo said, smiling.

Tommy blinked. He wasn't sure why it meant so much to him that this random kid from the southern city thought he was cool, but it did.

"So, um," he said, voice cracking slightly before he cleared his throat, "are *you* enhanced? Or is it just the horns?"

"No, I am," Tubbo said, though his gaze dropped a little at the admission. "Dad says it's not a very important power, but...."

"What is it?" Tommy asked, genuinely curious. "'Cause I bet he's dead wrong."

Tubbo smiled at him. "Alright, I'll show you," he decided, and skipped ahead down the street.

Tommy grinned, breaking into a jog to keep up with the energetic boy. Tubbo skidded to a stop outside what looked like a small pub; a few people were sat at the small round tables outside, barely paying the two kids any mind.

"Look here," Tubbo said, leaning over the flower box in the windowsill.

Most of the flowers had bloomed already, soaking in the summer sunshine, and a few bees were buzzing about, visiting each open bloom. Tubbo reached for one flower that had yet to blossom, though paused before touching it, gently opening his hand and facing his palm to it. His face was scrunched up in concentration, eyes fluttering closed, and then the bud began to sway lightly. Tommy's eyes widened as it burst open in one swift movement, a new purple bloom greeting them as its five petals stretched out.

"Tubbo! That was so cool," Tommy enthused, poking the boy in the side with a grin.

Tubbo's smile stretched from ear to ear. "You really think so?"

"Absolutely," Tommy said definitely. "So you can control plants?"

"Yeah, I think so," Tubbo said. "I don't really get the chance to practice often, because Dad doesn't think it's useful to be able to do."

"He's definitely wrong," Tommy said. "Imagine a hero that could control plants in battle? That would be beyond cool."

Tubbo's cheeks flushed. "I don't think I'm *that* powerful."

"You could be, if you did keep exercising your power," Tommy said earnestly. He paused, wondering if a human would know that; he could only say it with such certainty because he knew his own powers had been evolving ever since he started using them regularly.

"Maybe I will," Tubbo said thoughtfully. "You really think I could be a hero?"

"For sure, big man."

Really, there was no reason he couldn't be, if he trained well enough. Once you were registered with the power registry and were over the age of eighteen, you were eligible to be considered for hero duty. If you proved powerful enough, and didn't have any sort of criminal record, there was a decent chance you could be taken on by an older hero.

Of course, that brought about the disappointing thought that Tommy could never become a hero. He'd have to first admit to his many lies, most of which would get him arrested. On the off chance they didn't, he doubted anyone at the Watchtower would take him on after he had betrayed their trust. He could always try somewhere else in the country, but the thought of leaving L'Manberg for good left a sour taste in his mouth.

He and Tubbo spent the rest of the day exploring the city in each other's company. The boy was easy to talk to, and unbelievably generous, too. Tubbo bought them both ice creams as they were walking through one of the city's parks, which helped beat off the summer heat, and then later insisted on getting Tommy a souvenir from his trip. He bought them matching necklace charms from an eccentric little corner shop; two small compasses.

"You two had fun," Phil remarked with a smile as the two boys finally returned to the council building, just in time for the heroes to make their leave. "Nice bandana, Tommy."

"Tubbo gave it to me," Tommy said happily, smiling at the boy beside him.

"It's lovely," Puffy complimented the pair. "I'm glad you two got along. You'd better go, though, Tommy."

"Yeah," Tommy agreed, a little disappointed at the thought. He turned to Tubbo, smile almost sad. "Bye, Big T."

"It was really fun hanging out with you, Tommy," Tubbo said.

"Yeah, you too." *I'll actually miss this guy.*

"Wait — you have a phone, right?" Tubbo asked suddenly, and Tommy nodded. "Here — lemme give you my number. That way we can still talk."

"Oh, sure!"

Tommy handed over his phone, hoping Tubbo could still read the keyboard through the cracked screen. Tubbo didn't seem to have too much difficulty, inputting his number as a contact, and then passed it back, grinning.

"There. Now it's not goodbye forever."

Tommy grinned. "Talk to you later, then?"

Tubbo smiled wide. "You better."

"Alright, Tommy, when you're ready, Sapnap and George are gonna head up to the roof," Phil said. "I'll be right after you."

Tommy glanced questioningly between Phil and Puffy. "Are you not coming with us?" he asked the woman.

Puffy shook her head with a soft smile. "Dream and I struck a deal with Schlatt," she explained, almost regretfully. "We'll be staying behind for now. I'll probably see you again soon, though."

Tommy blinked, surprised. "Oh, okay." Damn, was he going to miss Puffy, too? She'd been so nice to him for the duration of the trip. "Bye, Puffy."

She reached out to him with a fond smile, giving his shoulder a squeeze. "Bye, Tommy. Take care of yourself."

Tommy nodded to her gratefully, and then turned to Tubbo, giving the boy one last smile. "See you again soon, I hope."

"I'll let you know next time I'm in L'Manberg," Tubbo promised. "Bye for now."

Tommy nodded, grinning, and then joined Sapnap and George in making their way to the elevator, soaking in his last few moments in the city. He would miss the place for sure, but he was looking forward to seeing Ranboo and Wilbur and Techno again, and of course, patrol. He'd already been gone for too long.

Phil smiled as the two boys made their goodbyes, before Tommy skipped off away with Sapnap and George. He was glad Tommy had found a friend while they were in the city; mostly because he could probably use the company of someone his own age, but also because he felt a little sorry for Tubbo, who had looked quite worrisome before befriending Tommy. Even now, he seemed a little lost without Tommy at his side anymore, and nodded nervously to the heroes before hurrying inside, muttering something about his dad.

"Poor kiddo," Puffy remarked softly, watching him go. "Can't imagine having Schlatt as a father. He can't be easy to deal with on a daily basis."

"No, I'd say not," Phil agreed quietly. The thought reminded him of why he'd hung back to speak with Puffy privately, and he raised an eyebrow at the woman. "Speaking of, did Tommy say anything to you at all?"

Puffy sighed, shaking her head. "No, he didn't," she admitted. "And he was honest any time I spoke with him."

Phil wasn't sure whether that was a relief or a disappointment. "And the turtleneck?"

Puffy nodded regretfully. "Yeah, he was hiding a bruise under it," she said, voice dropping to a whisper. "I suspect Tubbo knows, given the bandana he gave him."

Phil took a slow inhale in attempt to combat the nausea stirring in his stomach. "Primes...."

"I didn't push him to talk about it," Puffy added. "I think he knows I saw, but he seemed uncomfortable with it. Besides, if he told Tubbo a day after meeting him, I'm sure it won't be long before he says something to you."

"You think?" Phil asked, heart sinking.

Puffy nodded. "He trusts you, Phil. That much is obvious."

"But if someone's... if someone's hurting him, Puffy, can we afford to wait?"

"If someone *is* hurting him, I think it's important you do," Puffy said seriously. "If he's going to trust you, he needs to know that you're not going to force him into admitting anything he's uncomfortable with."

"Yeah, okay," Phil breathed. "Shit. I thought Wil was being dramatic when he mentioned it to me the first time, but this is the third injury he's had in two weeks. I've never seen anyone hurt that often who isn't on active hero duty."

"That isn't to say domestic abuse is the only possible reason," Puffy said thoughtfully. "His behaviour isn't totally in line for someone who's a victim of such. You should've seen him in the bathroom, Phil. Skeppy had him cornered, but he wasn't scared. If anything, it was like he was challenging him to try something."

Phil wasn't sure how to respond to that. He did agree that Tommy didn't really fit the skittish, quiet stereotype he expected of someone who was being abused, but he couldn't think of anything else that explained such frequent injuries.

"Just keep an eye on him for now," Puffy advised lightly, laying a hand on his shoulder. "If you're really concerned, maybe look into his roommate, see if there's a criminal record or any past allegations of violence."

"Yeah," Phil agreed after a moment. "Okay. Thank you, Puffy."

The woman smiled at him. "Not a problem, Phil. Look after him for me; he's a good kid."

Phil smiled to himself. "That he is."

Chapter End Notes

we now have a [discord server!](#) come in and say hi (or don't, there's no pressure!) <3 you can ask questions, send in art, discuss the fic, promote your own works and just get to know everyone in general! it's very laid-back and very chill :) you can always leave if you change your mind!

the bookmarks are still the funniest things ever to me skfhsksj "peter works at the avengers tower except peter is tommy and the avengers are SBI" like that's it. that's the fic huh

Settle and Crash

Chapter Summary

Tommy grows comfortable with his new routine. Meanwhile, violence is on the rise in the outer districts.

TW// descriptions of violence and injury

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for [notes](#)

They landed back in L'Manberg Friday evening. Techno and Wilbur had greeted them cheerfully as they returned to the floor, having ordered takeaway from a pizza place in first to celebrate their safe arrival back home.

Home.

Tommy felt a little warm at the word; sure, they'd probably meant it in the context that the city as a whole was home, but standing outside the elevator on the eighty-seventh floor to welcome them home, he couldn't quite swallow the bubbly feeling in his chest.

I am not becoming soft, he told himself, caught between amusement and indignity.

They sat around the table a little longer even after finishing the pizza, and Tommy and Phil told the other two the many stories they had from the trip. Phil told them all about Tommy's new friend, and despite the teasing "aww"s from Wilbur and Techno at the bandana and compass charm, Tommy couldn't find it in himself to be totally embarrassed. Instead, he changed the topic, recounting with pride his encounter with Skeppy in the bathroom — how he had discovered the poisoned drinks and saved the day.

"We don't know if they were actually poisoned," Phil had quickly clarified.

"But they probably were," Tommy insisted with a grin. "It was all very sketchy."

Wilbur scowled at the thought. "If I never see that man again, it'll be too soon. I can't believe that fucker would try something like that—"

"We don't know for sure if he did," Techno reminded him.

"But hopefully, we'll find out soon," Phil added. "Puffy and Dream worked some things out with him, and they stayed behind. They'll be in contact, and let us know if there's anything going on that we need to be concerned about."

Wilbur's eyebrows rose in surprise. "Really? Shit, I better talk to Puffy, then. If anyone will punch that prick for me, she will—"

"*Wil*," Phil sighed, shaking his head. "No."

Tommy just laughed. "I'll get him next time for you, Wilbur."

"Oh no, I am not letting you anywhere near him after what you just told me," Wilbur said. "You can stay here with us, where it's safe."

Techno coughed into his hands, a spluttered word that sounded somewhat like "*overprotective*". Wilbur whirled on him.

"I am *not*—!"

"Boys, settle," Phil said, rubbing at the bridge of his nose, but smiling to himself.

Tommy was smiling too. It was good to be back.

Wilbur took him home early that evening, and he arrived at the apartment just before Ranboo got home from work. The two reunited happily, and Tommy spent another long while recounting the tales of the trip all over again. If the details were a little twisted this time around, and Ranboo had heard some of the stories already on the phone, he didn't complain. They were just content to sit in each other's company again.

If it was possible to have missed L'Manberg after only having spent a day away, Tommy did. Being back was great. The summer weather was enjoyable without being overbearing, he could return to his usual routine with his favourite people, and most of all, he could get back to patrolling.

He spent the weekend with Ranboo studying sign — especially situation-specific phrases that were likely to come up in conversation with the Blade, like *heroes, tower, fight, violence*, the whole shebang. On Sunday, he even convinced his roommate to let him go for a patrol during the day, and Ranboo was able to see him at work, following him subtly from the ground. There wasn't much crime to stop during the day, and there were many more eyes on him than usual, though he didn't mind too much. He even felt a little proud when he did eventually interrupt a man who had been running away with someone's purse, vaguely aware of the people in the crowd who were taking videos of him.

Sweet publicity, he thought with a grin, catching Ranboo's eye from across the street. The taller teen shook his head in amusement. *Though this probably isn't being careful.*

"Who are you?" the owner of the purse had questioned him as he returned it, taking in his odd clothing with disdain.

If only I could talk.

"*T-H-E-S-E-U-S*," he finger-spelled, proud that his practice was paying off as the movements came to him with ease. So what if he was using the name Techno had given him — it was cool, for starters, as was the hero who had come up with it.

They blinked at him, baffled, and then turned on their heels, hurrying off down the street again. He sighed. *At least the Blade will understand me.*

Though as it turned out, he didn't run into Technoblade on patrol for another while.

Tommy was really settling into his new routine with work and patrol in the week following the trip. He finally felt it was true to say he'd adjusted to the time he spent in the Watchtower; no longer did his jaw drop of its own accord whenever he bumped into a hero he didn't see on the regular, and he'd done every job he could with SBI at least once, so he no longer required help with anything. He'd never been better fed in his life, with two full meals at work each day, and even Ranboo was benefitting, between the leftovers he snuck home and the extra food they could afford to buy. On patrol, too, he was really starting to get comfortable with his powers, and hadn't been getting beaten up as much.

Though there was always *something* that threw a spanner in the works. He wasn't that lucky.

He was patrolling later than he usually did one night; nothing much had happened, and he couldn't shake the feeling that people were waiting for him to go home. It wouldn't be the first time someone had memorised his routine, no matter how often he made a habit of changing it up.

His hunch turned out to be correct. He wasn't sure who exactly wanted to rob a *hardware store* of all things in the middle of the night, but there was a masked group of six or seven people breaking in anyway, and he made his move to intervene.

Dramatic entrances were a thing of the past as he silently jumped in after the group, though there was still some satisfaction in tapping on someone's shoulder and watching them go through all five stages of grief. This particular situation wasn't ideal for that, considering everyone was masked, but their body language said it all. He smirked, and sent a blast of magic through their body, sending them flying. The rest of the group descended quickly into chaos.

"Aw fuck, it's Theseus!" someone roared, and Tommy felt a surge of excitement.

Huh. Who knew the name was gonna catch on that fast? It nearly felt like being a hero, when he was recognised on the job.

He got to work fast, flaunting his magic as he fought them off a few at a time. It was a little difficult, with the number of them, but manageable. They were armed with various things: fists, crowbars, bats; someone even pulled a knife, but it wasn't too difficult to grasp with his magic and positively yeet to the other side of the large shop.

"You're some fucker, you know," one man was growling at him. "Messing with shit you don't understand."

Tommy just flipped him off and pulled his legs out from under him with a tug of magic. He whipped around at the sound of footsteps shuffling behind him, and caught a bat mid-swing with one fist, blasting away the person behind it with the other.

Primes, he wasn't sure he should have enjoyed this so much, but letting his magic loose was *thrilling*.

There were only two left to take down when there was a sudden crash from the back of the shop. Tommy paused, glancing up at the sound's source, and the man behind him took the opportunity to kick him in the back of the legs, sending him stumbling forward.

Come on, man, dick move.

That was when at least another seven people hurried up from where the crash had sounded. He realised vaguely that they had broken in to meet up with the first group; because of *course* he'd gotten himself involved in the gang violence Karl had warned him about.

Still, in a hardware store? Literally why?

"Who the fuck invited Theseus?"

"He followed us, dipshit, I didn't *ask* for him to join us—"

Tommy was already back on his feet, and sent the man skidding into shelves of various garden tools with a flick of his wrist. This was turning into a more serious fight; he was horribly outnumbered.

He looked back just in time to see someone pull out a gun. The shots rang out painfully loud in such close quarters, his ears ringing, and he stared in horror as he managed to catch the bullets just in time with a solid wall of his magic. *Shit, man, you know doing that makes me nervous—*

And then three of them were turning invisible, because of course, *of course* they were enhanced too.

Tommy took a slow, steady inhale, his heart pounding in his throat. *Alright then. Let's do this.*

A crowbar was the first thing to come swinging, and he ducked beneath it, jamming his head into his attacker's stomach. A little aid from his magic flipped the person over his head, and they landed with a painful thud.

Another two people made a simultaneous grab for him from both sides, and he boosted himself up to the top of the shelves, letting stray magic blast them both away at the same time.

Keep moving. And just in time as he darted forward, bullets sprayed the shelving where he'd been. His heart jumped in his throat. *You keep shooting like that, and police are gonna swarm the place.*

Staying on the shelves was his best bet considering the missing people he couldn't keep an eye on. He jumped back and forth between the aisles as he threw his magic at the people below, trying to keep his pattern of movement as random as possible. It was working, too.

Boom — there went one guy, and with another flick of his wrist, a second person was knocked out against the floor. There were less and less people up and fighting by the second.

He raised his magic to his face as the gunman took aim again, the bullets lodging themselves in the red forcefield.

Fuck, this wasn't exactly the way he'd wanted to practice that part of his powers. He carefully grasped the man's weapon with a stretch of his magic, flinging it as far as he could, and stuck out his tongue before realising the man couldn't see it anyway.

Yeah, fuck you, bitch—

And then a hard hit landed square on his back and the floor came flying up to meet him.

Tommy had to snap his jaw shut to stifle a pained cry as he landed on the floor below with a heavy impact. The air was ripped from his lungs regardless, and he felt his eyes water against his will.

"We've got him now, boys!" someone was yelling, though he couldn't tell where the voice was coming from through his disorientation.

He struggled to his hands and knees as quickly as he could, but his balance was thrown and his chest was still tight and his limbs were still shaking from the impact — and then a kick was landed right to his ribs and he crashed straight into the bottom of the shelves.

He had no time to recover from the blow. Whoever had been shrouded by invisibility and kicked him from the top of the shelves was on him in an instant, as were the rest of the goons accompanying them. Kick after kick was landed to his side, unrelenting as he was left unable to fight them off, much less move at all. The pain built with each hit he took, and his teeth ground together, struggling not to groan.

Panic was setting in fast. There were too many, all at once; he was trapped.

"Stop—" he tried, desperately, but he doubted he was even heard.

Then something hit his ribs that he knew wasn't just a shoe, because he really couldn't hold back the scream as something snapped in his side.

"Not so silent now, huh—"

And something snapped in his powers, too.

His magic *exploded*.

Tommy vaguely registered the crashes of people around him, relieved only by the absence of hits to his side. His powers were positively surging through and around his body, and this time there was almost no struggle in getting to his feet. His magic dulled the ache in his side, and lifted his limbs for him.

A hammer was on the ground at his feet. He glared at it. *A fucking hammer? You hit me with a hammer?!*

The men were beginning to stir again, and he jumped into action once more. It was about time he wrapped this up.

He stepped forward to face the first person who came back for more, and relished in the ease at which his magic threw the man. It was as if the strings had been cut on his powers; the speed and freedom at which they moved now left him breathless with excitement and adrenaline. He fought off another two, holding one in place while he hit the other with a punch, and then whipped around to deal with the last few — only to freeze.

There, dealing with the last of the men, was the Blade.

Seeing Techno at the Watchtower was... chill, now. Running into the Blade on patrol was disconcerting. But seeing the man in action right before his eyes?

That was downright terrifying.

The Blade moved like a dancer on his heels. His movements were calculated and precise, each step balanced and sure-footed and each spin of his axe careful and hitting every mark. He didn't aim to kill, which Tommy found surprising, given the rumours that followed him — but he knocked out the remaining guys within seconds with well-placed blows to the head.

Shit, Tommy thought. *That was really fucking cool.*

The last body dropped, and the Blade turned to face him. "You usually glow like that?"

Tommy blinked. He glanced down at his hands; his magic hadn't yet calmed, still swirling and surging in and around his fingers.

He shook his head, just about remembering not to speak. "*This is new*," he signed, not entirely sure how visible his hand movements were through the glow of his magic.

The Blade nodded, as if he understood. Tommy wasn't sure he did.

"The police are on their way," he said, gruff. "We should move, if you don't want to get caught."

Tommy nodded, wary. He wasn't sure why the Blade didn't turn him in — or why he was warning him about the police at all. He wasn't going to complain, though.

Techno led him out through the back of the shop, where the second group had broken in. The back door led them into a quiet alleyway, and Tommy made the quick decision to boost himself up to the rooftops with his magic, where it was more open. After a moment, the Blade found his own way up.

Tommy stood in silence for a moment; he certainly wasn't going to speak first. The Blade watched him carefully.

"You fought well in there," the hero said, and signed roughly as he spoke. Tommy felt an odd pang in his chest to see the Blade doing so; it felt quite real, in that moment, that one of the top heroes had taught himself sign language just for him. He was a little clumsy, and slow, but it was good, all considered. Tommy could understand it, at least. He hoped his own was up to scratch.

"How much did you see?" he signed back, relaxing into the movements.

His practice had paid off; he was relatively confident in himself even given the Blade's ability. Tommy had past experience on his side, at least. Everything came back easy enough once you had learned it once.

"Not much," the Blade replied, slipping off his mask again. It was odd, to look him in the eyes while he was Theseus and not Tommy. "Just caught the last bits."

So not me getting beat up? Tommy was itching to ask, though refrained from it. His magic was finally relaxing back into him, though as it withdrew, the pain in his side was slowly becoming more apparent. *That's going to be nasty by morning.*

"Though your form could be better," Techno continued, and Tommy glanced up in surprise. "You rely on your enhancement too much; people will catch you out."

"You don't know the sign for enhancement," Tommy pointed out. He hadn't exactly been prepared to hear or respond to critique — even if Techno maybe had a point.

Techno watched his hands carefully, studying the movement. He repeated it a few times himself, hands slow in their gauntlets. "Enhancement?"

Tommy nodded. Techno had the word figured out quickly; his fingers were a little off, but it was close enough to decipher.

"I was thinking," Techno spoke up again, "and I'm not putting any pressure on you, just so you know. But if you wanted to stop by the Watchtower sometime, there's this program in the works, Philza's heading it—"

"For vigilantes?" Tommy signed quickly, eyes wide.

Shit, maybe he should have paid more attention during those meetings in the southern city. Did Phil really care that much about vigilantes? In a good way?

Or was this just some set-up to round them all up in one place...?

Techno paused, working out the sign in his head. He nodded. "Yeah — for vigilantes. Though he hasn't really told anyone yet, so don't... I dunno, don't spread the word too early."

"Alright," Tommy agreed reluctantly. *"I'll think about it."*

He wouldn't.

"You should," Techno agreed. "It would help you a lot. Not just your form."

Tommy rolled his eyes in amusement. His form was fine. Mostly.

"You're doing good out here," Techno added, expression softening just a fraction. "But you could do better with training."

"Is that all you want me at the tower for?"

Techno nodded. There wasn't so much hesitance or hurry that the response felt genuine, and Tommy relaxed. Not completely, but Techno was a shitty liar, and this didn't quite feel like a lie.

"Violence is increasing all across the outer districts," he explained, and gave up on signing for a moment. "As you saw tonight. Most of the heroes in the tower are sticking to the inner districts, trying to prevent it from spreading. I don't want the outer districts to be abandoned completely, so... you could use all the help you can get."

Tommy blinked, surprised he cared about the outer districts at all. Most people overlooked them — he wouldn't hold it against Techno if he did too. That was just the way things were. If it had angered him before, he'd long gotten over it.

"You don't have to come to the tower if you don't want to," Techno continued, and began to sign again, slowing his speech to match. "But consider it. I'd be happy to help you out, and so would Phil."

Tommy swallowed the bitter taste in his mouth. *"And Ghostbur?"*

Techno paused, and Tommy examined his expression carefully. If anything changed, it was hidden well.

"He'll come around," Techno said decisively. "I'm sorry. I know he doesn't have... the best history with vigilantes."

"He doesn't."

Techno managed a small smile. "No," he conceded. "Just think on it anyway, alright?"

Tommy nodded. He still wouldn't.

"I'll see you around, I hope," Techno said, reattaching his mask to his face. "If you need any help... just let me know."

"Thanks."

Techno nodded, did his two-finger salute and dropped back down to the streets. He certainly didn't linger once a conversation was over, but that was Techno, alright. No big fan of socialisation in general. It made Tommy wonder why he went to so much bother for Theseus.

He hardly suspected him, did he?

Tommy didn't linger on the thought. It was already late in the night, and he needed to sleep off as much of the injury as he could. His magic had finally calmed, though in its leave, his side was throbbing with pain.

It worsened as he went to move, and he grit his teeth. Somehow he didn't think he would be jumping from rooftop to rooftop all the way home, but simply walking.

Even that wasn't easy.

Waking up was even worse. Ranboo had never stirred when he arrived home, and he hadn't woken him. Perhaps it was for the best; because if Ranboo had known how badly injured he was, he'd have tried to convince Tommy to stay home. Tommy didn't need that kind of sensibility in his life.

Reaching for the alarm on his phone was the first giveaway that it was not going to be an easy day. He had gasped in pain as his side twisted, and grit his teeth when moving at all after that.

A glance in the mirror at his side made even him nauseous, and he eased on one of his softer hoodies for the day, hoping it would help. It covered the sickening dark bruising anyway, which was the least any shirt could do.

Wilbur arrived on time as always. Tommy hurried down the stairs to meet him, unable to hide his smile at the sight of the brunet waving. He and his car, as per usual, were comically out of place on Tommy's street, though in another sense, they were right where they belonged.

"Morning," Wilbur greeted him with a grin. "Sleep well?"

The question sounded teasing, and Tommy glanced at his reflection in the car windows; his hair was, admittedly, all over the place. It had been the least of his concerns that morning.

"Shut up, man," he retorted, hastily brushing through his hair with his fingers. "Still look better than you."

"Keep telling yourself that," Wilbur snorted, and opened the door for him.

In contrast to the first time he'd sat into Wilbur's car to go to work, he felt much more comfortable now. His ride to and from the tower was as much a part of his routine as patrol and work. Wilbur always played music, but they would talk over it often and lip-sync to the words otherwise, making funny faces at each other.

It was nice. Enjoyable, even, though he'd never admit as much to Wilbur. He and Techno had a competition they thought neither Phil nor Tommy were aware of — a competition to be Tommy's favourite, even if that wasn't the exact word they used. Naturally, both Phil and Tommy knew about it, and they thought it was hilarious.

Even if it was a little embarrassing.

"Any song requests?" Wilbur asked, as they crossed from fifth into first. "And not—"

"Crab rave," Tommy said immediately, and couldn't help the cackling laughter at Wilbur's unimpressed expression. The movement hurt his ribs, and he forced the laugh to cut short, wincing.

"I am *not* playing crab rave in my car," Wilbur said. "It doesn't even have lyrics."

"It doesn't need lyrics!" Tommy insisted, grinning from ear to ear. "It's musical genius."

"You haven't heard musical genius yet."

"Oh really? Where would I?"

"Well, you haven't heard *me*, for starters—"

"You *sing*?!" Tommy interrupted, gaping at him. "Wait, seriously?"

"I—" Wilbur's cheeks reddened softly, caught off guard by the boy's genuine interest. "I mean, it's just a hobby, really—"

"You have to show me," Tommy said, and then paused, mischief gracing his tone. "'Cause I bet you suck. No other reason."

"You little—"

The impact was sudden. Tommy couldn't help the cry of pain that was ripped from his lips as the passenger's door was crushed against his injured side and the car was sent spinning across the intersection. Someone had apparently not seen the red light, and drove straight into them.

"Fuck!" Wilbur was cursing, fighting off the airbag as the car's movement came to a stop.
"Fucking *hell*—"

Tommy ducked his head away from the hero, cradling his ribs and biting down hard on his lip to muffle any further pained groans.

"Prime's fucking sake—" Wilbur flung open the car door, hurrying around to the damaged side.

Tommy half expected him to start cursing out whoever had crashed into them or demanding insurance details, but instead, the man nearly tore the damaged door from its hinges to get to Tommy first.

"Tommy — hey, look at me, yeah?" His voice was urgent, yet gentle. Tommy glanced up at him, hoping his eyes hadn't watered and betrayed his pain. "Are you alright? Are you hurt?"

"Fine," Tommy bit out, taking a deep breath and wincing at the sharp stab of pain that followed. *Broken ribs, then. That explains the snap.* "I'm fine, Wil—"

"Just let me check," Wilbur insisted. "I need to be sure."

Tommy shook his head. "No, no, you don't need to check—"

Wilbur met his gaze, dead serious. "I do, Tommy. It'll only take a second. If it's nothing serious, then I don't need to take you to the hospital."

It *was* serious, though, which was the problem. Tommy had seen what his side looked like that morning. And he couldn't go to the hospital — that was out of the question. The hospital meant bloodwork, and nothing would betray his enhancements to his employers faster.

"I'm fine, Wilbur, please," Tommy insisted. "It isn't anything serious."

"Then show me," Wilbur begged, and reached for his hand. "Tommy, I need to know you're okay. *Please*."

Tommy ducked his head, cursing innerly how fucking stubborn the hero could be. He would never win, would he?

He took in a shallow breath. "Okay."

Wilbur nodded, and carefully peeled up the side of Tommy's hoodie. Tommy looked away, unwilling to see the man's reaction, but caught the hiss of his breath anyway.

"Fuck," Wilbur breathed. "Primes, I—"

"Shit, is he okay?" another voice was asking, and Wilbur stood and turned in one swift movement, blocking Tommy from view.

"You can send your details to the Watchtower," he said icily. "We'll be in contact shortly."

"I'm so sorry — I wasn't looking, I—"

"Clearly not."

"Please no hospital," Tommy asked quietly. "Please. It's really nothing."

"That is *not* nothing," Wilbur said sternly, turning to acknowledge him again. His face softened, sympathetic. "But... if you promise you'll at least let Phil look at it—"

"Okay," Tommy agreed, nodding vigorously. "Yeah, okay, I will. Just no hospital."

"No hospital," Wilbur agreed. His smile seemed almost... sad. "The tower isn't far. Can you walk?"

"Yes, Wilbur, I'm not dying," Tommy insisted, though was grateful for the man's aid in getting him out of the car as his legs trembled.

"Prime knows what I'd do if you did," Wilbur sighed. "Fucking heart failure, you give me."

"Part of the job description, innit?" Tommy teased. "Saw it in the fine print. Cause as much trouble as possible and kill Wilbur Soot—"

"Gremlin," Wilbur jabbed, grinning.

He tugged Tommy over to the sidewalk as a group began to crowd around the crash, and cast a forlorn look at his car.

"I am sorry about the car," Tommy said, frowning. "It really was nice."

"I'll just use Techno's. But let me call someone first to get mine off the road, at least."

Tommy snickered. "Techno will love that."

"He loves everything I do. We're best friends."

"Yeah, sure you are."

Chapter End Notes

THE DISCORD HAS BEEN SO FUN SO FAR I LOVE YOU ALL <333

finally digging into that hurt/comfort let's go ;) only more to come from here folks

The Suit

Chapter Summary

Tommy and Wilbur recover in the tower, and Techno makes a proposal.

TW// mild descriptions of injury

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for [notes](#)

"Hey, Phil."

Wilbur was on the phone as he and Tommy walked to the tower. Said building was already within view, a couple minutes away at most.

"Yeah, everything's okay — well.... Okay, don't freak out, because I promise we're both fine — yeah, some prick hit us on our way through first. Phil — we're both alright. We're walking to the tower now."

Tommy smiled to himself; he couldn't hear Phil's responses, only the panicked buzzing from Wilbur's phone. Prime knew the old man was losing his shit at the news.

"I might just have you look at Tommy when we get there," Wilbur added. "No, no, *Phil* — he's okay, I just...."

Tommy glanced up at the hero, and met a concerned gaze. He looked away quickly, ignoring the pang in his chest.

"He's... yeah. Again. Listen, we're almost at the tower, we just passed the bus station. Yeah, I called someone to get the car. Okay — we'll see you in a minute. Bye, Phil."

Wilbur sighed, hanging up the phone and running a hand through his hair. Tommy eyed him warily.

"Some morning, huh," the hero said dryly. "You good?"

"Yeah, I'm good," Tommy said. "It'll take more than a shitty driver to bring me down, big man."

"I'm sure," Wilbur snorted.

They continued onward quietly, and Tommy tried to ignore the throbbing in his ribs. He glanced sideways to Wilbur, whose smile had slowly faded from his face. His heart sank.

"Are *you* good?" Tommy asked, almost reluctantly.

Wilbur tried to smile at him, but it was strained.

"Yeah," he said. "Yeah. But Tommy...."

Tommy met his gaze, worry settling in his stomach.

"Those bruises weren't... from the crash, were they?" Wilbur said quietly, and Tommy looked away, heart pounding.

"Tommy? Wil?"

The pair glanced up, surprised, to see Phil running towards them from the Watchtower doors. His emerald green robes billowed behind him in his hurry, concern etched heavy onto his

face. Techno wasn't far behind him, though remained at a brisk walk as opposed to Phil's unabashed sprint.

"Phil," Wilbur greeted the older man in surprise. "You didn't have to come out here, man—"

"Are you both alright?" Phil asked urgently, gentle hands carefully checking them both.

"Yes, yes, I'm fine," Wilbur insisted, though Tommy didn't miss the glances thrown his way.

"We're both okay," Tommy added, smiling at Phil, and Techno, as he approached. "Can't say the same for Wilbur's car."

"Don't even think about using mine," Techno drawled.

"I would never," Wilbur said smoothly, grinning at the hybrid.

"Wil said you were hurt, Tommy?" Phil asked, a hand brushing the boy's cheek.

Tommy shot Wilbur a betrayed glare. "I'm fine," he said.

"You promised you'd let Phil check," Wilbur said, meeting his gaze firmly. "*Tommy*."

Tommy bit his cheek, looking away again.

"Well, let's get you two up to the floor, first," Phil decided, nodding. "And off the street."

The group made their way into the tower and up to their level with haste. Tommy had to swallow down the rising nerves in his throat more than once as Phil guided him over to one of the couches in the living area, Wilbur and Techno right behind him. It was this or the hospital, he reminded himself firmly, trying to insist that everything would turn out alright.

"Sit, sit," Phil instructed, easing him gently into a sitting position. "Can I lift your hoodie?"

Tommy's throat was tight. The panic in his stomach was dull but nauseating, and he grit his teeth, angry with himself to find that his hands were lightly trembling. It wasn't fair; why did he have to lie, why couldn't he have both his identities, why couldn't he hide any of his *fucking injuries*—

"Tommy?" Phil asked, voice soft. "You're shaking."

"M fine," he mumbled, wringing out his wrists. It wasn't like he could avoid the check-up without making things even more suspicious. "Just get it over with."

Phil exchanged a worried glance with the other two heroes, though gave Tommy a small nod. Careful hands lifted up the bottom of Tommy's hoodie, and eased one of his arms out of the sleeve, bunching the fabric up around his shoulder. Tommy kept his gaze resolutely on the floor as what he knew was a rainbow of bruises was revealed to the heroes.

"Fucking — *Primes*," sounded Techno's low voice, followed by a muffled yelp as he was elbowed in the ribs by Wilbur.

"I'm just going to poke you a little, alright mate?" Phil asked, and Tommy nodded.

Gentle fingers pressed around his injury and Tommy sucked in a breath, the throbbing increasing.

"All good so far?"

An answer was on the tip of Tommy's tongue, though it died in his throat as he had to bite back a cry of pain when Phil pressed on one particular point on his rib.

Phil's hand retreated, and Tommy relaxed, heaving a shaky exhale.

"Take a deep breath for me mate, okay?"

Tommy did so, and winced at the burning stab that shot through his side, face screwing up in pain.

"Broken rib," Phil murmured. "It's just one break, as far as I can tell. I'd like to get an x-ray ___"

"No hospitals," Tommy cut him off, glancing between Phil and Wilbur. "You promised."

Phil seemed reluctant.

"There's nothing they can do for a broken rib anyway," Tommy added quietly.

Phil pinched the bridge of his nose, contemplative, and then sighed. "Okay."

"Shitty morning, right?" Tommy joked lamely, pulling his hoodie down again with haste. "Wow."

Nobody laughed. The unease in his stomach only worsened.

"It's okay, you can laugh, I know I'm funny," he mumbled.

"What happened, Tommy?" Phil asked him quietly.

"Well we were hit by a car, for starters—"

"Tommy," Phil murmured, cutting him off. "What actually happened?"

Tommy's heart sank, replaced with a horrible sense of dread.

"You have to understand, Tommy, it looks like someone took a bat to you," Wilbur pressed.

"Wil—"

A hammer, actually, Tommy thought, though pushed down the sarcastic remark. He knew he had to give them something believable.

"I'm just saying, Phil. The bruising is horrible."

"Yeah, okay, okay," Tommy interrupted, huffing. "I, uh, fell down the stairs outside my apartment. Was bringing boxes up for our neighbour, couldn't catch myself."

Phil's face only fell further, and Tommy grimaced. The excuse sounded weak, even to him, but he didn't know what else to say.

Hi, I'm Tommy, but you might also know me as Theseus, the vigilante who not only lied to you about his age, powers, and injuries, but can actually talk, too, because he needed just one more thing to lie about!

"There's painkillers in the kitchen, Tech—"

"Got 'em," Techno said, already on his way back with a bottle of pills in one hand and a glass of water in the other. "Here, Tommy."

"Thanks," Tommy muttered, though took them gratefully. He downed two tablets, hoping the effects would kick in fast and beat off the aching in his side.

"We should send you home," Phil said. "You need to rest—"

"No, no, no! It's fine," Tommy interrupted quickly. "I'm fine. I can still work."

"I'm not so sure," Phil said, skeptical. "Tommy, that's a... pretty serious injury. I'm not going to make you work today."

"It's okay! I can do it," he insisted, growing desperate. "It's not as bad as it looks, it barely even hurts. Besides, it'll take ages to fully heal. You can't keep me at home forever, and I — I need the money."

So maybe the last part of that argument had slipped out against his will. He seriously needed an undo button for real life.

Phil exchanged a worried glance with the other two heroes.

"I think he'll be alright," Wilbur said, if a little reluctantly. "He did walk all the way here just fine. We can keep the work light today."

Tommy shot him a grateful smile. Wilbur returned it.

"Okay," Phil conceded, sighing. "We'll just take it easy for a while. Primes."

"You better not pass out on our floor, though," Wilbur warned, pointing a finger at Tommy. "I'll put you on wash-up duties for a week."

"Dickhead."

"Gremlin."

"Stop it, you two," Phil said, shaking his head in amusement. "Come on, then. Let's find you something to do."

"Actually," Techno spoke up, "I had something in mind for today."

The other three glanced at him curiously, and Techno scratched at the back of his neck. Tommy raised his eyebrow.

"I've talked to Sam about it already, and he gave me the go ahead," Techno added hastily. "But, uh—"

"What?" Wilbur asked.

Techno's expression shifted slightly. "Er... so there's a... vigilante, down in fourteenth—"

Tommy's heart dropped like a bag of bricks.

"Fourteenth? Tommy's district?" Phil said.

At the same time, Wilbur echoed, "a vigilante?"

Oh shit. Oh holy fucking shit.

"Yes," Techno replied carefully, averting his gaze.

Wilbur raised an eyebrow at the hybrid, baffled. "We... can't take Tommy hunting a vigilante, Techno?"

Techno wrung his hands together. "No, I know—"

Fuck, fuck, fuck, I should've gone home, I should've gone home—

"Then what...?"

"Do you mean Theseus?" Phil asked, and Tommy wished the floor would open up and swallow him whole. How had Phil even heard about him?

"You know Theseus?" Tommy croaked.

Phil glanced at him. "Do you?"

Tommy's brain short-circuited. "Yeah." *What the fuck why did I say that—*

Wilbur and Techno turned to him in questioning. Tommy couldn't feel his pulse anymore.

"I — y'know, I do live there," he stammered. "So I've seen him around a few times. Um. He doesn't... talk. So."

Wilbur was staring at him with an expression he couldn't quite read. Techno, beside him, looked... oddly pleased.

"What do you think of him?"

"Good," Tommy said, head blank. He nodded. "He's good."

"I thought so too," Techno said, the corners of his lips twitching.

"You've met him?" Phil asked, curious.

Techno nodded. "I've run into him a couple of times patrolling the outer districts. He's strong."

Tommy, in the vague fog of his head, felt something akin to pride.

"Enhanced?" Phil asked.

"Yeah, he's got powers," Techno said. "Like this red—"

"Magic," said Tommy, and then snapped his mouth closed. *Stupid, stupid, stupid.*

"Yeah, magic," Techno agreed with a nod.

"Okay, so what about him?" Wilbur asked, tone cold.

Techno paused, considering his words. "I want to make him a suit."

Tommy's jaw dropped open.

"You—" Wilbur was staring at him in disbelief. "*What?*"

"He's doing good down there," Techno said, hands fumbling for something to do; he settled for folding his arms. "And he's powerful, but his clothes look like he found them on the street."

Tommy decidedly ignored the irony of that statement. Yeah, so maybe he had dumpster dived for some of it.

But Techno... wanted to make him a suit. A proper one, built for combat and patrol, just like the heroes' suits—

"Are you serious?" Wilbur said, tensing. "You... want to make a *vigilante* a suit."

"Yes," Techno said, and met his gaze firmly. "Wilbur, I know what you're thinking, but I've met Theseus twice now. He's got heart, I trust him."

"Twice?" Wilbur echoed, disbelief and shock heavy in his expression. "*Twice*, Technoblade?! Two meetings, and you think you know the guy."

"Wilbur—" Phil warned.

Wilbur whirled on the man, anger flaring. "Don't you start. I shouldn't have to remind you what they're fucking capable of."

"They're not all the same," Phil said calmly, meeting his gaze.

Tommy's head was spinning. What the fuck was happening?

"And what, you're just on board with making this guy a suit? *Sam* is on board with this?"

"I told him about Theseus, and he agreed," Techno said cautiously. "It's more dangerous letting him roam around the streets in his pajamas. He's gonna get himself killed—"

"More dangerous?" Wilbur echoed, gaping at him. "I can't believe this shit. Are you hearing yourself?"

"Wilbur, it's been years. You have to let it go—"

"It's not just about that!" Wilbur retorted, eyes blazing. "Vigilantes are illegal. They are not to be encouraged. If the council finds out you're helping one? Or even someone else in the tower? You'll lose your hero's licence—"

"Are you gonna report me, Wilbur?"

The room fell into a weighted silence. Tommy's heart was drumming in his neck, a beat so loud he was sure the others could hear it. Wilbur and Techno were glaring daggers at each other, and Phil was glancing warily between them, sitting up where he was crouched beside Tommy. The tension was so thick you could have cut it with a knife.

Wilbur stood suddenly, and Tommy nearly jumped out of his skin.

"I want no part of this," he hissed, and stormed off towards his room.

Tommy winced, while Phil let out a stressed exhale and Techno slumped further into his seat.

"Could've gone worse," Techno muttered. "All things considered."

"Could've gone better," Phil pointed out. "You picked a shit moment to land that on him, after everything else this morning."

"Yeah," Techno admitted, rubbing at his eyes. "Sorry, Tommy. You shouldn't have had to see that."

"S'alright, big man," Tommy murmured, though he wasn't entirely sure if his heart would ever recover from the scare of his other identity being brought up so casually.

"So Theseus, huh?" Phil asked, raising an eyebrow. "Tommy said he doesn't speak. Is Foolish really interested in having you learn sign language, or was there a different motivator?"

"I think you already know," Techno grumbled. "Sam's waiting for us below. Tommy, you should come with us."

Tommy glanced back to where Wilbur had disappeared, hesitant. "Will he be okay?"

"I think it's best we give him time alone to cool off," Phil murmured, and then smiled. "Besides, tech genius, I bet you have a ton of ideas already."

Well, he certainly wasn't about to pass up the opportunity to work on his own suit.

"I guess," Tommy said, cracking a smile. He glanced between the pair cautiously, supposing he needed to make some attempt at throwing off any suspicions. "Are you sure you... want to make this guy a suit? Y'know... like Wilbur said, he is... illegal."

"I know," Techno said, nodding slowly. "But this one's good. I've only spoken to him twice, but I've watched him otherwise — he's helping people, out there. And since nobody at the tower will go out to fourteenth, he should be as well-equipped as he can be."

You've been watching me? Tommy thought wearily. *That* was something to unpack for later.

Phil nodded in agreement. "I trust your judgement, Tech. I've seen the YouTube videos of Theseus as well, and he does seem to have good intentions—"

"YouTube videos?" Tommy spluttered, eyes wide.

"Yeah, there's one going viral at the moment," Phil noted with amusement. "He saves this woman's purse and then finger-spells his name. That's how people started figuring it out."

Oh, that was publicity Sunday, with Ranboo, Tommy recalled vaguely. He hadn't expected word of him to spread this far, though. That made him a little nervous. He was quite content with his small status as a local district legend.

"Fair enough," he managed to get out.

"And I've never been fond of the laws against vigilantes anyway," Phil added. "There's a few troublemakers, but so many of them are just misguided kids. If they had someone to give them proper guidance, there wouldn't be half as big a problem."

"Is that why you're setting up the training program?" Tommy blurted out, and then froze.

Phil glanced at him curiously. "Oh, so you were listening during all those meetings with the council," he teased, smiling. "Yes, as soon as I get the word of approval, which should be any day now. I argued my points when we were in the city below very clearly; there shouldn't be much discourse over it anymore."

Tommy paused, contemplative. He hadn't been sure if he could trust that the program didn't have an ulterior motive when Techno had told him as Theseus, but surely there was no need for Phil to lie to him as Tommy, too. Either the heroes were covering their tracks completely to create a foolproof vigilante trap, or it was genuinely just a training program.

Techno nodded towards the elevator. "Come on then, let's not keep Sam waiting."

Shit, my own suit, Tommy thought with a rush of excitement, the realisation fully hitting him. Technoblade wanted to make him an actual, professional hero suit. For *him*. A suit made *just for him*.

He walked to Sam's lab in a daze, guided by Phil and Techno. His head was positively spinning; Primes, the past twenty-four hours alone had been the most stressful of his life, yet there was still a silver lining to it all.

Fucking hell, my own suit!

A video was playing on the projector when they entered the lab. Sam stood in front of it, arms folded as his fingers tapped against his elbow in thought. Tommy drew closer, eyes widening as he realised the figure in the video was him. So this was the viral clip Phil was on about.

"He's quick on his feet, isn't he?" Sam said aloud, pressing a button on the table that restarted the video.

Tommy watched nervously as he, masked as Theseus, boosted himself up over the crowd with magic. The footage was shaky enough as someone ran to keep up with him, but he could still make it out as he jumped over and between people before landing a kick just strong

enough to have the criminal he'd been pursuing flat on his back. It was the purse-stealer from Sunday.

"That he is," Phil agreed. "How's it going, Sam?"

Sam turned to the group with a smile. "Good, good. It's always a good day when I get to design something brand new."

"You sure you're happy to go ahead with this?" Techno asked. "You know some people won't be happy if they find out."

Sam raised an eyebrow at the hybrid. "I'm not doing it for the vigilante, I'm doing it for the technology," he said, and grinned. "And I know how to keep things on the down-low."

"As long as you're sure," Phil said, stepping closer. "We're all taking a risk."

"Hey, I just work here," Tommy cut in with a nervous laugh.

Phil grinned at him. "Yeah, you had no choice in the matter if we get caught, don't worry."

"Though we won't get caught," Techno added. "What're you thinking, Sam?"

"So Theseus could definitely use an upgrade," Sam stated, clapping his hands together as he turned back to the table. "Techno, man, you've met him. Give me your thoughts first."

"He's very reliant on his magic," Techno said, and Tommy made a face. Of course he was going to have to endure even more critique from the hero. "Though he's not afraid to fight up close, either. And as you saw, he's pretty agile."

"We're definitely gonna need something that offers him better defense," Sam mused, stepping around the table to pull up a blank body model on the hologram. "Measurements will be difficult to get, though."

"I could ask him, but I dunno when I'll run into him next," Techno said.

Tommy shifted on the spot as Phil and Techno drew closer to the table. Primes, the mere prospect of getting his own suit was beyond exciting, but having all the heroes he regularly interacted with as Tommy discussing Theseus in such detail was nerve-racking. If they all put their heads together, they'd have him figured out in minutes if they wanted to.

Techno turned to him to beckon him closer, but then paused, glancing him up and down.

"Tommy might work."

Tommy's heart dropped. "What, sorry?"

"I'd say you're around the same height as Theseus," Techno said, examining him. "Close enough build, too."

You've gotta be fucking kidding me.

"Alright," Sam said, stepping closer to Tommy. "I'll take your word for it. We can keep the suit on the looser side, anyway, to allow room for fit."

"Sounds good," Phil agreed. "Techno, you said he has magic? What kind?"

A small crease appeared in the hybrid's brow. "Not one I've seen before," he admitted. "The only instrument he uses to control it is himself. And it's flexible. I thought at first it was just energy, but he can manipulate it into a physical force, too."

Alright, shit, so you have been watching, Tommy thought with a frown. He knew he hadn't shown off *that* much of his enhancement in front of the Blade.

"Is there anyone at the tower we could use as a base?" Phil asked. "In case we wanted to incorporate some magic aspect into the suit. George, maybe?"

"Or you," Techno said, and Tommy's eyebrows rocketed into his hair.

"You have magic?!"

Phil rubbed at the back of his neck, still staring at Techno. "I don't use it very often," he admitted. "It's... tiring. And it's more so light manipulation than magic."

"It's magic," Techno said, winking at Tommy.

Tommy grinned. "Philza Minecraft, that is so beyond cool."

"Thank you, Tommy," the older replied wearily.

"But..." Tommy continued, biting his cheek. It was stressful, giving input without giving away how much he actually knew about Theseus. "I don't think we need to add any magical aspects to the suit."

Techno raised an eyebrow at him, and even Sam glanced up from where he'd started drawing.

Tommy continued in a hurry. "You said the only instrument he uses is himself, right?" he said, looking at Techno, and Primes it was fucking weird talking about himself in third person. "So I don't think he needs or would use enchantments, like George. And we can't

assume that adding any magic-friendly features wouldn't actually interfere with his own abilities, right?"

Sam shrugged. "You make a fair point, Tommy. Any other ideas, while you're at it?"

Tommy took a deep breath, and ignored the stab in his ribs. "Let's make sure he keeps his mask, yeah? For his identity and shit. But the goggles look horrible. Maybe we could slim them down or something?"

Techno nodded, smiling. "Yeah, we could do that."

"Alright, sounds good so far," Sam agreed. "Prioritise bulletproof or flexibility?"

"Flexibility," Tommy said quickly, and then swallowed as three pairs of eyes looked his way. "Y'know... there's a fair few criminals around fourteenth, but it doesn't make it much easier for them to get their hands on a gun. So not much point in bulletproof, really."

"I'm slightly concerned that you know that about your... local criminals," Phil said, face creasing in worry.

A nauseating flare of panic nearly made Tommy gag. "Everyone has their run-ins," he said quickly, playing it casual. "Nothing too serious myself, just... assholes looking for lunch money."

"Shit, mate. You alright?"

"Yeah, yeah," Tommy said, nodding. "They're not usually looking to hurt anyone, just to get what they want."

"I've heard reports that violence out in your district is increasing," Techno mentioned. "Have you noticed?"

"No," Tommy replied, maybe a little too fast. Could Techno keep these kinds of questions to Theseus? Answering as Tommy was even more difficult, and Tommy could speak. "I mean it's not... unusual, that people are up at night making trouble. If they've gotten any worse recently, I wouldn't know about it. Especially with Wilbur picking me up and dropping me to the door — don't spend as much time on the streets."

Techno nodded, and Phil ran a hand through his hair, looking thoroughly stressed.

"You, uh, have these encounters on the streets often?"

Tommy didn't actually run into criminals often at all as a civilian, though if he did, he could barely differentiate between such encounters and the ones on patrol.

"No," he answered thoughtfully, and then, "Theseus, actually, um... yeah, Theseus saved me once."

"Really?" Phil asked, eyebrows raised in surprise.

"Yeah," Tommy replied, considering texting Ranboo right then and there to dig his grave. He really was the worst, huh. "Yeah, I didn't really get a good look at him, and he didn't stick around or anything, but it was cool. Not getting stabbed was almost as cool."

"Stabbed?!"

"Okay, I dunno if he actually had a knife, I was exaggerating," Tommy said quickly, before Phil could have a heart attack. "Let's get back to the suit. Right? The suit we're making for... Theseus."

"Right," Sam agreed, nodding at the boy. "Any other suggestions for features you guys wanna throw at me, before we start looking at materials?"

"An emergency contact button," Techno said.

Tommy glanced at him in surprise, barely biting back the "*what?*".

"Yes, actually, that's a good idea," Phil said with a smile. "In case he gets into serious trouble and needs help."

"To contact who?" Tommy piped up, baffled. "The police? Because I don't think they'd be over the moon—"

"Us, of course," Phil answered, amused. "Who else?"

"Oh," Tommy said.

"All of SBI?" Sam asked, raising an eyebrow.

They all knew what the man was really asking. *Ghostbur, too?*

"Oh yeah, throw down Wilbur as well," Techno said, looking smug. "He needs to get over his vigilante thing."

"What, so he can arrest Theseus when he's vulnerable?" Tommy challenged, not exactly fond of the idea.

"Wilbur wouldn't go that far," Phil said softly. "Not in an emergency situation. And I... actually agree with Tech on this. It might do him good to help out a vigilante, and see they're not all that bad."

Oh for the love of—

"O-kay," Sam said happily, tapping in a few lines of notes with a projected keyboard. Tommy still thought the whole set-up was the coolest thing ever. "I can add an emergency button that will send all three of you a message when he's in trouble. Sound good?"

"Ideal," Phil said with a smile.

Yeah, just wonderful, Tommy thought dryly. I'd love you all to be there when I'm dying, because I won't be pressing that button unless I am. Not with Wilbur connected up to it.

"Nice," said Sam, and clapped his hands together decisively. "Okay, now we can start on the suit design as a whole. Any ideas, Tommy?"

Oh, he had plenty.

Chapter End Notes

i wrote and edited this at 3am and i am very tired and i hope it's all okay :D

if you're not in it already, [join our discord!](#) you won't regret it :)

A History in Vigilantes

Chapter Summary

Wilbur reveals to Tommy the reason he isn't so fond of vigilantes.

TW// mild descriptions of injury

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for [notes](#)

Tommy, Sam, Phil and Techno spent almost the entirety of the day working on Theseus' suit. Wilbur didn't show his face again at lunch or dinner; Eret said he'd gone out on patrol, and Tommy felt a pinch of worry for Quackity and Karl. He didn't understand why Wilbur had it out for vigilantes so bad, but he just hoped the other two he was familiar with could look after themselves while the hero was in a mood.

The suit was coming along well. It was unbelievably good luck that Tommy had so much input, when none of the heroes had a clue about his identity. Primes, they had even used *him* to fit the suit; which, yeah, felt a little suspicious, but it was just based on Techno's observations. All in all, it was customised pretty much perfectly for him.

"It won't be done today," Sam had told Techno, as they finalised the blueprints. "It'll take a little while for the machines to stitch it together, and I'll need to make some parts of it by hand."

"I'm in no big hurry anyway," Techno assured him. "Take all the time you need."

"And I can help, if you need it," Tommy added eagerly.

Sam grinned at him. "I'd be happy to let you, as long as Phil is too."

Phil had shrugged with a smile. "I suppose I can spare you for a little while, until it's done."

"Philza Minecraft, you are my favourite."

"Thanks, mate."

It was on the elevator ride back to the eighty-seventh floor that Phil got the call. He seemed surprised as his phone rang, though smiled at the number that appeared.

"Puffy," he mouthed to Techno, who regarded him with a curious glance. "Hey, Puffy. How're things?"

Tommy exchanged a glance with Techno as the pair listened intently. Unfortunately, it was too difficult to pick up what Puffy was saying; though Phil, rolling his eyes in amusement, noticed their predicament.

"Can I put you on loudspeaker?" he asked. "I have Tommy and Techno here with me."

The reply came, and Phil smiled, taking the phone from his ear and pressing a button. Puffy's buzzy voice rang out from the speakers.

"Hello Tommy, Techno."

"Ayup, Cap'n," Tommy replied with a grin.

"Hey Puffy," Techno said. "How's working with Schlatt?"

"It's... been mundane," Puffy admitted, sounding amused. *"I was calling actually to get back to you on the situation with the drinks—"*

Tommy perked up immediately. "Were they poisoned?" he asked, straightening as if to hear better. "Who were they for? What—"

"Let the woman speak, Tommy," Techno cut him off, amused.

In front of them, the elevator doors opened with a ding. The three stepped out onto SBI's floor, still focused on the phone.

"Thank you, Techno," Puffy laughed. A light sigh followed, the sound static-y. "Unfortunately — or, fortunately, maybe, depending on your angle — they couldn't find anything wrong with the drinks. That said, it was Schlatt's company conducting the investigation."

"Bullshit."

The three glanced up in surprise at the voice to find a tired Wilbur standing in the hall, still in his suit. He had a cloth pressed to his cheek; a red stain was blossoming beneath his fingers. He met their stares, frowning almost regretfully.

"Hey, guys. Sorry about earlier, by the way," he mumbled. "Especially you, Tommy—"

"You alright, mate?" Phil asked, concerned.

"Got a bit reckless on patrol," Wilbur admitted, wincing. "I haven't gone out alone in a while; forgot I had to watch my own back. It's nothing serious."

"You, uh, catch anyone?" Tommy asked. He wasn't sure he wanted to hear the answer.

"Just some idiots trying to rob a jewellery shop," Wilbur said with a shrug. "In broad daylight. Clearly they're new to the whole crime thing."

Tommy pretended as if he hadn't felt a notable wave of relief that Ghostbur hadn't apprehended any more vigilantes yet. He nodded. "Wrong'uns, they are."

Wilbur nodded, his gaze dropping to the phone again as he stepped closer. "Hey, Puffy," he greeted wearily. "So nothing? Really?"

"I'm afraid not," was Puffy's reply. *"And the report they gave me seems pretty legit."*

"That's such bullshit," Wilbur repeated, and ignored Phil's warning glance. "They did the investigation themselves, it would have been beyond easy to fabricate results."

"I know," Puffy agreed. *"And I wasn't allowed to conduct my own tests. They confiscated the drinks pretty quickly."*

"But what about the P?" Tommy inquired. "Did they say anything about it?"

"Just that it was a marker for flavour, to differentiate the coffees," Puffy said. *"Pumpkin spice, or whatever. Yeah, I know."*

"I don't trust Schlatt for a second," Wilbur hissed. "Who the fuck in that room would even drink pumpkin spice? And nobody else ordered a flavoured drink? It doesn't add up."

"Nobody ordered anything," Phil explained, expression unreadable. "The drinks were just brought to us by Schlatt's... assistant, or whoever that was."

"Skeppy," said Tommy.

"I did look into Skeppy's files, actually," Puffy chimed in, and the four quietened, interest piqued. *"They couldn't block me from those. That said... I couldn't find anything out of place. He started working for Schlatt about a month and a half ago, in the research and*

documentation department of the company. No criminal record, no past grievances. All his information was in order."

"Research and documentation," Tommy echoed thoughtfully, mostly to himself.

Techno glanced at him anyway. "Thoughts, Tommy?"

"I didn't take Skeppy to be a research-and-documentation kind of guy, when I knew him," Tommy admitted. "Though I dunno what he worked as before Schlatt. I'm probably overthinking things."

"I doubt it," Wilbur said, narrowing his eyes. "They're definitely covering something up."

"Oh, I agree, believe me," Puffy spoke up again. "I won't stop looking into it just because they closed the investigation. Dream's doing his fair share of searching around as well. If we find anything new, we'll let you know asap."

"Thank you, Puffy," Phil said kindly. "Take care over there."

"Yeah, we dunno how far Schlatt would go to keep you quiet," Wilbur said darkly. "Stay safe."

"That's cryptic, Wil," Techno remarked dryly.

Wilbur raised an eyebrow at the hybrid. "Would you put it past him?"

Techno sighed, folding his arms. "I don't know him well enough."

"I've only met him once, and that was enough," Wilbur said. "Guy gives me the creeps."

"I'd better go," Puffy said with a sigh. "Can't keep the boss waiting too long."

"When are you coming back to the tower?" Tommy asked, purely because he was curious. Not because he missed the woman, of course not. He was a big man.

"Hopefully soon," Puffy said, and he could hear the smile in her words. "The contract I signed didn't have a definite end date on it, so I don't know for sure."

"If ever you feel like punching Schlatt to end it early—"

"No, Wilbur," Phil cut in, shaking his head in amusement. "Alright Puffy, we'll let you go."

"Talk again soon," Puffy said. "Bye, everyone."

The group murmured their own goodbyes to the woman, and Phil hung up, tucking away his phone. For a moment, there was a tense silence as they recalled their earlier interactions, and then Wilbur cleared his throat.

"How's the suit coming along?" he asked awkwardly.

Techno raised an eyebrow. "Thought you wanted nothing to do with it."

Wilbur narrowed his eyes at the hybrid, and Phil sighed, shooting a warning glance at Techno.

"Good," Tommy said, deciding *somebody* needed to answer Wilbur's question. "Really good. We're giving him a little gadget that tunes into the frequencies the police use, so he can locate crimes easier. Like you have."

Wilbur managed a weak smile. "Was that your idea?"

Tommy nodded, smiling back. "I, uh, thought he'd like to have it. It sounded useful."

"Yeah, it is," Wilbur said, and took the cloth from his cheek for a moment to examine how much blood had soaked into it.

The answer was a lot. Tommy winced at the sight; the wound didn't actually seem too bad, but it had painted the side of Wilbur's face red.

"Here, mate, can I have a look?" Phil asked, stepping closer.

"It's shallow enough, just being stubborn about closing up," Wilbur replied with a nod, and Phil gently pressed around the wound, humming in thought.

"Yeah, I don't think it needs stitches," he said, and a drop of blood rolled down Wilbur's cheek as he squeezed it carefully. "Here, come into the kitchen and I'll bandage it."

Tommy and Techno waited in the living area as Phil patched up Wilbur; it was about the time of night Tommy headed home anyway, so there wasn't much point in starting another job. As soon as Wilbur's face was clean and wrapped up, he changed out of his suit and back into his usual sweater and jeans, and smiled at Tommy as he reentered the kitchen.

"Ready to go?"

"Yup," Tommy said with a grin.

Broken rib aside, he was excited to go out and patrol that night now that he knew he had a new suit on the way. Sure, he wouldn't have it for a while, but that was all the more reason to

make the most of his homemade patrol outfit while he still had to use it. It wasn't much use for anything but keeping him clothed, but it had become a bit sentimental to him regardless.

Wilbur nabbed Techno's car keys as they headed to the elevator, and Tommy laughed as he caught the hybrid's weary expression in reaction to this.

"Bye Tommy!" Phil called.

"See you tomorrow," Tommy replied with a grin.

Then the doors were closing and the elevator began its long descent to the underground carpark.

"How's your side?" Wilbur asked him, leaning back against the wall.

"Not bad," Tommy said with a shrug. "Phil's been feeding me painkillers all day, so I can barely feel a thing."

Wilbur laughed lightly. "Sounds like Phil alright."

"He worries almost more than my roommate does," Tommy agreed, grinning.

"Oh?"

"Yeah, he's gonna freak when he finds out about this," Tommy said, gesturing to his ribs. "Maybe I just shouldn't tell him."

"Wasn't he there?" Wilbur inquired, sounding confused. "When you were... bringing boxes up to your neighbour?"

"Um, no," Tommy answered awkwardly. "He was... grocery shopping."

Wilbur paused, considering this for a moment. Tommy wasn't sure why he was so interested in Ranboo's whereabouts. It made him uneasy; he couldn't think of any reasoning behind it.

"How was your patrol?" he asked instead, genuinely curious.

"Not bad," Wilbur said, shrugging. "Quiet, mostly. I just needed... air. And some time to myself, really. I *am* sorry for earlier, by the way."

"It's okay," Tommy replied, surprised. "It's not like you were wrong. Vigilantes *are* illegal."

"I know, it's just...." Wilbur trailed off, gaze dropping to the floor. He shook it off. "I was being a prick anyway, and Prime knows we already had a rough morning. I'll make it up to you."

"What? Oh, you don't have to," Tommy said hurriedly. "It's not that deep, I'm over it all already."

"No, I will," Wilbur said, and smiled. "We can stop by a café or something on the way back to your place."

"It's really alright—"

"Tommy, I'm fucking starving," Wilbur laughed. "I missed lunch *and* dinner. Please let me stop somewhere for food."

Tommy cracked a grin then, too. "Should have opened with that, big man. Pretending that it was for me—"

"Well, it is," Wilbur said quickly, snorting. "That's still true. I'll get you dessert or whatever you want. On me."

"Okay, okay, fine," Tommy laughed. "Since you're making it up to me, then, can I pick the place? I've been meaning to visit a friend for a while."

"Sure."

That was how the pair found themselves pulling into Niki's bakery half an hour later as the sun set over the city.

"You just passed a parking spot," Tommy pointed out with a mischievous grin.

"Are you kidding? I wasn't going to fit Techno's car in there."

"'Cause it's too big, or 'cause you're a bad driver?"

Wilbur shot him a playfully irritated glare as he drove around the carpark again. "I'll show you a bad driver if you're not careful."

"We've already been in an accident once today, I think I'll pass."

Eventually, Wilbur did manage to park the car and the pair stepped out into the cool evening air. The hero regarded the brick building before them with a skeptical gaze.

"Are you sure—"

"I know everything in fourteenth looks shit, but trust me that this place isn't," Tommy interrupted. "There's a decent few places in the district, once you give it a chance."

"I wasn't saying it looked *shit*—"

"I'm messing with you, big man," Tommy laughed. "Come on, if I have to listen to your stomach rumble any more I'm gonna lose it."

They were greeted by the sweet fragrance of warm pastries and the ringing of a bell as Tommy pushed open the door. The bakery had taken on the role of the local café since Bad's place had shut down, and there were numerous people seated around the place, chatting over freshly made goods. Tommy's mouth watered as he examined the desserts in the display cabinet; the smell in the building was glorious. Between that, the warm lighting and the relaxed ambience of the place, the atmosphere was wonderfully welcoming.

"This is charming," Wilbur said genuinely, taking in the room with a smile.

"Tommy!"

Tommy grinned as he spotted Niki behind the counter, dragging Wilbur over. The pink-haired woman was dressed in a floury apron, smiling widely at the boy.

"I was wondering if you were ever going to stop by again," she teased lightly, and then took in his company, expression twitching minutely. "And... Ghostbur is with you. Well, this is a surprise."

"It's just Wilbur, please," Wilbur managed with a weak laugh.

"Welcome to the district," Niki said, smile stiff. "I didn't know you worked with Tommy?"

The quick glance she shot Tommy's way was questioning, and he grinned even wider at her concern. Of course, it probably didn't look great from her perspective; a secret vigilante just hanging out with the hero responsible for the most vigilante arrests across the city.

"It's a bit more like I work *for* him," Tommy said happily, shooting a smile at Wilbur. "But yeah, pretty much."

"I didn't know you knew Tommy," Wilbur returned politely.

"We're good friends," Niki said, smiling at the boy. "I've known him since he started working at Bad's place."

"That sounds... vaguely familiar."

"His muffins were pretty well renowned across the city," Tommy explained. "Even Phil knew him, when I went for my interview."

"Primes, that feels like ages ago already," Wilbur said with a grin.

"How are you finding the new job, Tommy?" Niki asked. "Now that you've finally stopped by so we can talk about it."

Tommy laughed. "It's great, actually! We're working on a proper suit for Theseus at the moment," he said, sneaking the woman a wink.

"Though that's *not* something we should really be publicising," Wilbur cut in quickly, voice hushed as he elbowed Tommy. "Considering it's against the law."

"You won't find anyone here who would report you for that," Niki said with certainty, and Tommy felt a wave of gratitude for her support. "Theseus is a great help to the district. We owe him a lot, for all he does for us."

Wilbur blinked, startled into silence. Tommy grinned at Niki, who returned the smile.

"But yeah, work's been good," Tommy continued. "I just help around where I can, organising information or — oh, oh, get this — I've been helping Awesamdude with hero suits in the lab. *Awesamdude!*"

"It's true," Wilbur said with a smile that almost seemed fond. "Tommy helped finally overcome a design flaw in my own suit, and it works brilliantly now. Smart kid, he is."

"I'm not a kid, I'm eighteen," Tommy retorted.

Niki raised an eyebrow at him. He shot her a glance that he hoped convey how serious keeping his real age secret was, and she nodded.

"You look like a child," Wilbur snorted.

"I do *not*," Tommy argued, sticking out his tongue at the man. He was a big man and he was not childish ever.

Niki shook her head in amusement. "Well, what can I get for you two tonight?"

"Get me the sweetest thing you have on the menu," Tommy said with a mischievous grin.

Niki made an amused expression, though input something into the cash register anyway. "I pity Wilbur having to mind you after this much sugar."

"I do not need to be minded."

"It's okay Tommy, I'm a great babysitter," Wilbur joked, and laughed at the boy's insulted expression. "Um... the toffee pudding looks good, I'll take one of those."

"Get him three, the man is starving," Tommy interrupted.

"Tommy—"

"I refuse to listen to your stomach growl at me any longer."

Wilbur sighed, cheeks red in embarrassment, though didn't argue it any further. Niki smiled to herself at Tommy's victorious smirk, pressing a couple more buttons.

"How much is that?" Wilbur asked meekly, pulling out his wallet.

"It's on the house," Niki said with a smile.

"Oh, you don't have to — I know heroes probably don't come around here often, but—"

Wilbur stopped talking as he noticed Tommy struggling to contain his laughter, and his cheeks reddened even further.

"It's not free because you're a hero, Wilbur, it's free because I'm a legend," Tommy said gleefully. "And so is Niki. Thank you, Niki, by the way."

"My pleasure," the woman chuckled, preparing their desserts on small plates for them. "Stop by anytime."

"Thank you," Wilbur murmured, even more embarrassed now.

Tommy cackled at the sight of him, and had to hold his ribs as they ached in complaint.

The two found a quiet corner to seat themselves in, taking their food with them. The view of the sunset over fourteenth through the window felt homely to Tommy, and he hoped it met Wilbur's standards too. The district was, regardless of its lack of wealth and cleanliness, home.

"This place is quaint," Wilbur stated, as he started on the first of his puddings with a small smile. "I like it."

"Told you it's not bad," Tommy said with a grin. "*Quaint*. You use fancy words to feel smart, don't you?"

Wilbur snorted. "Aww, jealous you don't know what it means?"

"I know what *quaint* means, you prick," Tommy jabbed, though couldn't hide his grin.

Wilbur just smiled at him. "You know, I was thinking, since you mentioned it earlier — about your interview. I was a prick that day too."

"You were," Tommy agreed cheerfully. "Techno told me to break your legs."

"Yeah," Wilbur said, making a face. "But... I should apologise for what I said then as well."

Tommy blinked. "About... not wanting an assistant? Because that's valid, man—"

"Yeah, but I was a dick about it," Wilbur said. "And as it turns out, having an assistant is actually kinda useful. And I actually don't mind him hanging around as much as I thought I would."

Tommy's chest bubbled with warmth. "Is this you saying you actually do want me around the tower?" he laughed, raising his eyebrows in surprise.

Wilbur grinned. "Yeah, I guess you could put it that way."

"Oh, shut up man, you're making me feel all mushy and shit," Tommy joked, kicking Wilbur's leg under the table. "But... thanks, I guess."

"Of course."

Tommy grinned at him. He let Wilbur eat more of his pudding; because Primes, the man was hungry, judging by the rate at which he was swallowing it down. And then he decided to take the risk. He was in a good mood — how badly could it go?

"I have a question."

"Shoot."

Tommy bit his cheek. "Why do you hate vigilantes?"

Wilbur stilled, meeting his gaze. Tommy's heart skipped a beat.

"I don't *hate* vigilantes," Wilbur said carefully.

Tommy raised an eyebrow. Wilbur sighed.

"Okay," he relented. "I guess I'm not... fond of them."

"It's just...." Tommy paused, taking care to word things properly. "It feels like you have a personal vendetta against them."

Wilbur was quiet for a moment, deep in thought. He glanced at Tommy, and almost looked... unsure.

"I... yeah. It is sort of personal," he admitted. "I don't like talking about it much."

Tommy blinked. *What the hell did a vigilante do to Wilbur that has him this caught up over it?*

"We don't have to," he said quickly.

Wilbur shook his head. "It's okay. Phil and Techno know, so... I guess it's only fair you do too."

Tommy nodded, leaning over the table to listen as closely as he could. Wilbur heaved a long sigh.

"When you first start out as a hero, you tend to get assigned to minor inconveniences. And when *I* first started, there was a minor inconvenience in the third district that came in the form of a vigilante," Wilbur said, frowning. "Their name was XD."

He spat the name with a venom Tommy had never heard on anyone's tongue before.

"XD wasn't... wasn't a good vigilante," Wilbur continued. "They caused chaos for the fun of it. Started fires, started fights... all in the name of so-called justice. Nothing serious, or I wouldn't have been assigned to take them in. But I was, and I spent... *months*, trying to apprehend them without any success."

"They were a good fighter, then," Tommy assumed.

Wilbur shrugged. "I would beat them easily now, but I was completely new to the job at the time. And XD was slippery; they ran more often than they fought back. Then a few days later, they'd do something else, and I'd be sent back after them again. And I guess they got bored of our little routine, because...." He trailed off, tensing.

"What?" Tommy asked quietly, trying to prompt Wilbur to speak again.

The hero paused, his gaze falling to the table.

"One day, I was sent out again because XD was vandalising a building," Wilbur said, exhaling slowly. "I thought it was just another day; that I was gonna catch them this time, because that's what I thought every time. I put my heart and soul into it." He sighed. "But it was different. XD didn't even try to run. They... taunted me, started throwing me around the place like a doll or some shit. I lost my temper, and I.... I went for the kill."

Oh.

Tommy swallowed, eyes wide. Wilbur winced.

"I know, I shouldn't have, and I wouldn't now. I was younger, and I was *stupid*," he bit out. "But I did. I was just so sick of being the shitty new guy, who they always sent on shitty missions to get this shitty vigilante — and I guess XD was sick of it as well. Once they realised I wasn't playing around anymore, they... used their enhancement on me. I hadn't even known they had one."

Tommy winced. "What... what was it?"

Wilbur's frown deepened. "They cursed me," he said quietly. "They cursed me so that I — I can never sleep. Not really. There's always a part of me awake. I can't dream, or... or die."

Tommy felt as though the breath had been punched out of him. He met Wilbur's gaze, horror settling deep in his chest mixed with a sense of pity; Wilbur had never looked as tired as he did now.

"And you — you beat off the curse, right?"

Wilbur shook his head slowly. "XD disappeared after that," he muttered. "Never saw them again. I was so... bitter, in the early days — trying to live with it all. I still am, but there's not much I can do anymore, y'know?"

"Shit," Tommy breathed. "Wil... I'm so sorry."

Wilbur managed a small smile. "Thank you, Tommy."

"Did you ever try tracking them down? Surely there's some way to break the curse, right?"

"Of course I tried," Wilbur said, "but they literally vanished. Not a trace. I spent so long, falling deeper and deeper — um, without Phil and Techno, I think I would've spiralled forever."

Tommy's heart ached.

"Sorry," Wilbur said with a weak chuckle. "I don't mean to depress you. But that's the story, I guess. And I know — before you say it, because *Primes* I've heard it enough from the others — I know vigilantes aren't all the same. But part of me... part of me will never forget that."

"Yeah, of course," Tommy said quietly. *Shit.*

"So, um, that's me," Wilbur said, and smiled softly at the boy. "Anyway – how are things with you right now? Any news from outside work? I feel like we never ask."

"Well, there's not much to say," Tommy replied honestly, head still spinning from Wilbur's story. Yeah, that all made it a lot harder to stay bitter about the hero's numerous vigilante arrests. "I wake up, go to work, go home. Same story everyday."

"Primes, that's boring," Wilbur snorted. "Don't you have a hobby? You hardly sleep that long every night."

"Um, I walk around the city sometimes," Tommy said carefully. "In the evenings."

"Just walking?" Wilbur pressed, raising an eyebrow. "You got a pet or something?"

Tommy grinned from ear to ear. "Oh yeah, his name is Ranboo."

"Ranboo?" Wilbur echoed, baffled. "Interesting name choice, I guess. What is he, a dog?"

"Yeah," Tommy replied, all too happy with himself. "The worst breed, too."

"Which is?"

"No idea. What's your least favourite breed of dog?"

"I don't really—"

"Whatever that is," Tommy said happily. "He's the worst."

Wilbur snorted. "You do... like him, right?"

"Of course I like my dog," Tommy replied, feigning shock. "How dare you suggest otherwise."

Wilbur laughed hard, then, and Tommy's smile nearly split his face.

"Is this dog *real*?"

"Real as can be," Tommy promised. "I would never lie to you. Just don't ask for pictures."

"Can you introduce me when we get back to your apartment?"

"No, he's got social anxiety."

The corners of Wilbur's eyes creased with pure joy, and Tommy had to fight down another wave of the warm, bubbly feeling in his chest before his magic could respond to it. He felt horrible for the hero, after hearing what he had gone through — was going through, still, in regards to the curse; but as long as Tommy could make him smile as wide as he was now, it was alright. He was doing his part in hopefully lessening the load on Wilbur's shoulders, and that was good enough for him.

If he could save people as Theseus, and make them smile as Tommy, that would always be good enough for him.

Chapter End Notes

i don't know if i can commit to using XD as a serious name but i've done it now whoops

also! for those of you asking me about socials, i made a new [twitter account](#) mainly for this fic :) follow if you want, i'll be posting and retweeting art people have made for this

among other fun things :D

Training

Chapter Summary

Tommy learns a few things from SBI, and meets a new but familiar face as Theseus.

TW// descriptions of violence

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for [notes](#)

Wilbur ducked beneath another swinging fist, side-stepping Techno's body before spinning around to land a blow to the hybrid's back. Techno didn't even flinch at the hit, whipping around with steady footing. His fist carried the momentum of the turn straight into Wilbur's chest, who panicked and phased through the punch.

"Thought we said no enhancements?" Techno said gruffly, barely out of breath.

"I don't feel like getting the shit beaten out of me for the sake of training," Wilbur huffed back. "You always win when we spar."

Tommy watched as Wilbur made a large circle around Techno before kicking off the wall and propelling himself onto the taller's shoulders.

"Shit, that was kinda cool," he remarked to Phil beside him.

SBI didn't train together too often; when they patrolled so regularly, especially Wilbur and Techno, that was all the practice they really needed. Yet the Watchtower mandated at least once monthly training days, and with most of his other work caught up on, Tommy was permitted to sit atop a stack of mats in the training room on their floor and watch. For now, Phil was sitting beside him, making casual commentary on the others' fighting, though he too was suited up.

It was *very* cool, seeing the Angel of Death in uniform.

Watching the training was proving to be really educational for Tommy as well. He found himself invested in the fights, analysing Techno and Wilbur's every move and wondering if anything was applicable to his own fighting style. It was true that he tended to rely on his magic, so seeing the heroes in hand-to-hand combat was interesting, to say the least.

Wilbur was still perched atop Techno's shoulders, one elbow under the man's chin and the other fighting off the two fists struggling to bring him down.

"Wilbur has agility on his side," Phil explained, wings shifting behind him. "He's lighter and quicker, so he's able to move around faster. Techno is more heavyweight, which makes him stronger, but he's not as quick."

Tommy wondered where Phil himself lay on that spectrum. He imagined his wings, as large as they were, weren't exactly light — though Phil had a more lean, narrow build similar to Wilbur's.

Techno gave up on trying to pull Wilbur down, face turning red, and instead slammed his back into the wall. Wilbur yelped as all the air was pushed from his lungs, and he fell from Techno's shoulders in an ungraceful pile of limbs.

"Tapping out?" Techno asked smugly.

Wilbur glared at him, struggling to his feet as he gasped for air. "You fucking winded me—"

Techno didn't hesitate to continue once the man was standing again. He swung a fist towards Wilbur's stomach, and Wilbur phased straight through his body, jumping forward. He whirled around once he was behind him, crouching and swinging a leg hard into the back of Techno's knees. Techno grunted, stumbling onto one knee as his legs buckled.

Wilbur was quick to put the hybrid into a headlock again. Techno tucked his chin in under Wilbur's elbow, hooking a foot around his leg at the same time. When he stood again, Wilbur was thrown off balance, and Techno manipulated this fully, throwing the man to the ground.

The air left his lungs once more as his back collided with the mat, and Wilbur tapped the floor with a hand as Techno leaned over him, grinning.

"Another win for the Blade."

"Prick," Wilbur gasped out, red in the face.

Clearly, recovering from being winded twice in a row was too difficult a feat for even Ghostbur to pull off. The man lay on the ground for a few minutes more, chest heaving as he struggled to start breathing again.

"That's how you do it, Tommy," Techno called over, the triumphant expression still on his face. "And Wilbur even tried cheating."

"You're used to fighting without your enhancement, that's not fair," Wilbur argued immediately, pushing himself up onto his elbows. "I'm not going to ignore an advantage I can hold over you."

"You don't use your enhancement?" Tommy asked Techno, confused.

"Do you know what it is?" Techno asked.

"Super strength, right?" Tommy said; he'd only heard rumours, but it seemed to line up with what he'd seen of the Blade in action. "I thought it was the kind of enhancement that was always activated, though."

"More than super strength," Wilbur cut in. "Super durability, super stamina—"

"*Pog*," Tommy said, eyes wide. "No wonder they say you're unstoppable, shit."

Techno raised an eyebrow. "They do?"

Tommy blinked. "Yeah, like — that's what everyone says. The Blade never dies."

"Huh," Techno remarked. "Well, I'd like to think I earned that reputation on pure ability and skill."

"Alright, calm yourself, don't want that ego of yours inflating any further," Wilbur jabbed, and pushed himself to his feet.

Techno rolled his eyes. "You're just jealous you can't fight for shit without using your enhancement."

"Why don't you use yours?" Tommy chimed in, before Wilbur could retort.

"He loses control," Wilbur interrupted anyway, shooting a smug look Techno's way. "Hey, you spoiled my weakness, I'm telling him yours."

Techno huffed, but didn't argue the point any further. "I don't have much... conscious input when my enhancement is activated," he explained with a shrug. "I can't control when I use it, either. Thankfully it doesn't happen often."

Tommy raised his eyebrows. He knew part of Ranboo's enhancement was something similar; as part enderbeing he could teleport at will, but when enraged or pushed past the brink of his own emotional regulation, he could turn into something deadly. Tommy had never seen it himself, and Ranboo said it had only ever happened once. He didn't want it to happen again.

"Is it tied to your emotions?" he inquired, curious.

Techno shrugged again. "Don't really know, to be honest with you," he said. "It doesn't show up often enough for us to study it. Hence, I haven't been able to train myself with it either."

"Damn," Tommy remarked.

Phil hopped down from the stack of mats then, fluffing out his wings.

"Up for another round, Tech?"

Techno grinned, flexing his fingers in his gauntlets. "You sure you're ready, old man?"

Tommy couldn't see Phil's face from his seat on the mats, but he could hear the smile in his voice.

"We'll see who you're calling old in a minute."

Wilbur took Phil's spot beside Tommy, letting his posture slump with a sigh. Tommy glanced sideways at him, grinning.

"How's your back after all that?" he teased.

Wilbur made a face, poking Tommy lightly in the ribs — his good side, at least.

"You little shit," he shot back with a smile. "I'd love to see you try and fight Techno, then we'll see who's laughing."

"I reckon I could handle myself," Tommy said, the honesty in his tone going unnoticed by Wilbur. "Longer than you fared, anyway."

Really, he was dying to try his hand at sparring with one of the heroes. He knew it would be dumb to ask, especially since his magic tended to flare on its own during a fight, but the temptation was there regardless. As much as he was learning through observation, trying his hand at it himself would be far more fun *and* educational.

Though his moderately decent fighting ability would probably be questioned, and Ranboo would kill him if he let anything else slip.

Phil and Techno were circling each other on the mats below, fists raised, and Tommy bounced in his seat. He was buzzing with excitement at the prospect of seeing Philza Minecraft in action.

"Go Phil!" he called.

Wilbur grinned. "Yeah, fuck him up, Phil!"

Phil shot the pair a wink, and Techno took advantage of his distraction, making a swift jab with his fist. Phil smoothly side-stepped the hit, and Tommy whooped.

The two continued to circle for another beat, and this time Phil engaged first, black wings spreading wide as he charged Techno. He feigned a punch to the man's face, instead ducking under and around the arm that came up to block it. He hooked a foot around Techno's leg as he spun around behind him, though Techno seemed prepared for this, making a quick turn on his other foot and remaining well balanced as the fight continued.

Tommy was on the edge of his seat as he watched the two spar. *Punch. Block. Dodge. Punch.* Techno and Phil seemed evenly matched as they battled it out. Phil was agile, like Wilbur, able to manoeuvre himself quickly to avoid incoming hits and land lighter blows; yet his wings gave him weight and strength, and when he planted his feet to endure a heavier hit, he didn't move an inch.

"Why doesn't Phil patrol?" Tommy found himself asking, as his eyes followed the man around the room. "I think crime rates would drop to zero if this is what they were facing."

"He's too good for it, to be honest," Wilbur replied, watching the two spar with mild interest. "He's reserved for serious incidents. So is Techno, though I think he scares the higher-ups. They won't tell him to stop."

"I think they should reconsider," Tommy said bluntly. "At least for like, one or two patrols. It might stop the violence, even for a little while."

"Violence?" Wilbur echoed, turning to look at him. "In your district?"

Tommy swallowed. "Yeah, here and there, y'know. I mostly just hear about it from other people."

"Mostly?" Wilbur parroted, eyes widening.

"I meant only," Tommy corrected quickly, averting his gaze. "I only hear about it from other people, yeah."

"Techno mentioned reports of increased violence in the outer districts," Wilbur murmured thoughtfully, and Tommy heaved a sigh, letting his heart rate settle again. "I hadn't thought — but is it?"

Tommy shrugged. "I guess," he answered. Patrol certainly felt busier the past couple weeks than it had when he'd first started.

Wilbur looked contemplative. "I could ask if Fundy and I's schedule could branch out to fourteenth for a while—"

"No, no!" Tommy cut in hurriedly, panic spiking again. "You don't have to. We have Theseus, and Techno patrols out there too."

Wilbur blinked at him, baffled. "He does?"

Oh fuck, Techno hadn't told them. But did that mean fourteenth wasn't even on his schedule for patrols? Did he go out there on his own accord?

Tommy bit his cheek. "Uh, yeah," he said, deciding he had to stick to his word now. *Sorry Techno*. "Saw him from my apartment one night, all suited up and shit."

Wilbur hummed. "He hadn't mentioned *that*."

"I guess not," Tommy said nervously, turning back to the fight and hoping the conversation would drop.

To his immense gratitude, it did.

Phil and Techno were slowly tiring from the constant back-and-forth, both red-faced and breathing hard as they continued to spar. Tommy was beginning to think neither of the two were going to take the win, when Techno swung a heavy punch and Phil seized the opportunity.

Wings propelling him forward, in a burst of energy Phil grabbed onto the outstretched arm and swung the lower half of his body around Techno's waist. He grappled with the larger man where he hung onto him, before using a strong beat of his wings to twist himself right around, flipping Techno with his legs. The piglin hybrid was slammed onto the floor as Phil landed steadily on his feet, both breathing heavily.

Reluctantly, Techno tapped out, and Phil grinned, relaxing.

"Holy *shit*," Tommy said, jaw agape. He was *so* going to try that move out on patrol.

"Well fought, Tech," Phil said happily, helping the other to his feet.

"You too," Techno replied, dusting himself off. "Would've had it in the bag if I hadn't already sparred Wil."

"Whatever helps you sleep at night, mate," Phil teased.

Tommy laughed at that, and Wilbur grinned.

"How did you do that last move?" Tommy asked, eyes shining.

"All about momentum," Phil replied. "You get enough power into your movement, you can send anyone flying. Of course, the wings help."

"Another advantage you had," Techno pointed out with a smile.

"Aw, can't take the L, Techie?" Wilbur jeered playfully.

Techno shot him an irritated glance. "I see you're still sour about yours."

"Boys, boys, settle," Phil cut in, though was still smiling. "Tommy, are you alright to tidy up in here while we get cleaned up?"

Tommy laughed at how kindly Phil asked, almost with an air of hesitance. He seemed to forget that Tommy worked for him sometimes, and that he didn't have to ask him to do things; he just had to tell him to.

"Of course, big man," he replied with a grin.

"Dibs on showering first," Wilbur said quickly, hopping down from the mats.

"You'll use all the hot water," Techno huffed.

"The tower has enough hot water for both of you, Primes," Phil sighed, rubbing at the bridge of his nose. "Just shower at the same time."

"That ruins the water pressure," Wilbur whined.

"It really does," Techno added, and Tommy was nearly surprised at his agreement.

Phil exchanged a tired glance with Tommy. "The shit I have to deal with," he said, gesturing at the younger heroes. "Thank Primes I have you around now too."

"Yeah," Tommy agreed happily. The words brought an odd warmth to his chest; like he belonged.

The heroes dispersed not long afterwards to clean themselves up, and Tommy was left alone in the training room. There wasn't much to do, given they'd only been sparring; he straightened the mats they'd been fighting on, and then wiped them down with a cleaning spray he'd found in the room's only cupboard. All in all, it took him a few minutes tops to have the place back in order, and by that time, none of the heroes had yet returned from their respective rooms.

He looked around the training room, a little bored as he waited. He was sixteen and left unaccompanied in the Watchtower; of course he was going to find something to do. Recalling what Techno and Wilbur had said to him on his first day, about using the room to blow off steam, an idea was planted in his head.

Was it dumb? Probably. Would Ranboo kill him if he knew what he was doing? Yeah, almost definitely. But SBI wasn't back yet, and he felt that Wilbur and Techno were the kind of people who showered for ages after hearing their complaints about water pressure. He could afford to take a little risk, right?

Yeah. It'd be fine.

Eyeing up the training dummies lined up at one wall of the room, Tommy set his sights on a particularly roughed up one in the middle. He approached it gingerly; there was a button on the dummy's shoulder, and when he pressed it, he was surprised by a robotic voice.

"User...?"

Tommy blinked, unsure. "Uh... Wilbur Soot."

"Welcome, Ghostbur. Current high score: one thousand, two hundred and fifteen."

High score? Tommy thought, baffled. *There's a scoring system?*

He jumped back as the dummy suddenly jolted forward, and only then did he notice the track it was on between mats. The dummy moved forward until it reached the centre of the room. Tommy followed it curiously.

"Five minutes remaining. Time starts now."

Tommy paused, watching the dummy, but nothing else happened. Glancing again towards the doors to the room, which were still firmly shut, he let himself fall into a fighting stance and swung his fist. It collided with the dummy's padded chest firmly, and a buzzy *"ten"* echoed from the dummy's voice box.

Alright, Tommy thought, determination setting in. Let's do this then.

He fell into a comfortable rhythm of punches and kicks once he was sure of what he was doing. It felt a little odd, attacking a still dummy when he was more used to fighting real, moving people; but it gave him more opportunities to have fun with his movements and experiment with his combat style. Hand-to-hand wasn't usually his go-to when he had powers, but it was admittedly less stressful when his opponent couldn't fight back.

Even still, five minutes straight of punching and kicking got tiring pretty fast. Tommy was breathing quick through his mouth by the time the dummy announced there was thirty seconds left on the clock, and then a flare of competitiveness spiked within him. He kind of wanted to beat Wilbur's high score.

His magic rose to meet the thought without him asking it to, and he just about managed to contain it within his fists, the faintest wisps of red slipping out between his fingers. A thrill rushed through his veins at the strength his power granted him, and he had to suppress a grin at the force with which he hit the dummy in the last few moments.

"Five seconds," it informed him.

Tommy smirked, and let his magic surge beneath his skin for one last blow to the dummy. He hit it with enough force that its head nearly touched the floor before bouncing back to a straightened position.

"Finish. Score: one thousand, one hundred and thirty-five. High score not overwritten."

Tommy grinned nonetheless; he'd come pretty damn close, for some street vigilante from fourteenth. He rolled his shoulders back as he caught his breath, relaxing his magic.

"That was pretty impressive."

Tommy jumped nearly a foot into the air at the voice, caught off guard. He whirled around, eyes wide, to find Techno leaning against the doorway. The hero had his hair wrapped up in a towel atop his head, and was wearing loose, plain clothes — a stark contrast to the caped suit he'd changed out of.

Tommy didn't know what to say; his heart was pounding at the thought of being found out. Thank Primes he'd been careful with his magic, at least; but had Techno known what to look for, he could be in trouble. It was questionable anyway, how well he'd fought for some scrawny eighteen-year-old.

"Where'd you learn to fight like that?" Techno asked, and seemed genuinely curious.

His casual tone did nothing to ease Tommy's nerves.

"How much did you see?" Tommy asked instead, searching the man's gaze desperately for answers. *Did you see my magic? Is it over for me?*

Techno shrugged. "Just caught the last punch," he answered. "Which was... wow, first of all. And your score says a lot about how well you did."

Tommy swallowed. "I took self defense classes as a kid," he said warily, which was a total lie — but what was another one added to his collection? "Fourteenth's not the most peaceful place to grow up in."

Techno's expression twitched with something unidentifiable — skepticism? Concern? It was under control again before Tommy could reach a conclusion.

"You look really dumb with that towel on your head," he stated bluntly, before Techno could get another word in. Maybe insults weren't the best defense mechanism to have, but it did the trick.

Techno cracked a smile. "Sure, Tommy."

"I'm right, aren't I?" Tommy shot back, though his own lips were lifting at the corners now. He slowly let his guard fall again, flinching only as the dummy suddenly retreated back to the wall.

"Sure, Tommy," Techno repeated, voice conveying the sarcasm perfectly without any inflection. "Well, I'd rather walk around with a towel on my head than drench my shoulders with wet hair."

In all honesty, Tommy hadn't considered how having long hair would affect the drying process. He shrugged nonetheless, still focused on letting his heart rate return to normal.

"You wanna help me get started with dinner?" Techno inquired, nodding his head in the direction of the living area. "The others aren't out yet."

"Sure," Tommy agreed, glad Techno seemed to be letting any confusion over his fighting ability go.

Dinner was something he'd been worried about for a while when he'd started working, watching SBI take turns preparing the meal, but he'd never been asked to do so alone himself so far. He just helped out every other night, and was content in being told what to do, be it chopping vegetables or stirring the pot.

~~(Which worked out great, because Tommy couldn't cook anything on his own if it didn't come in a packet with instructions.)~~

The rest of the day passed without any further incidents, and Techno didn't mention anything about Tommy using the training room to the others. That didn't stop Tommy from feeling ever so slightly on edge until he left work with Wilbur, though.

Patrol that night was as thrilling as ever, and a great relief to forget about the day's events and clear his mind. He knew he probably shouldn't be exerting himself so much with his still-healing ribs, but he couldn't help it, really. Launching himself through the night air was

nearly becoming an addiction; with the breeze catching his hood and his magic flowing freely as adrenaline pumped through his veins, he had never felt better.

And Primes, he couldn't wait to receive his new suit. Even if faking surprise was going to be a little difficult.

Well, at least he wore a mask.

For now, he still had to seek out active crime the traditional way, making his rounds across the district with an eye peeled for unusual activity. He was still buzzed after watching SBI train, and was dying for a real fight to test out some moves for himself.

As he caught sight of a rowdy group leaving the underground station, he supposed it was his lucky day. The trains weren't running at this hour, so there was little doubt in his mind they were up to no good. He trailed the group from a distance, wary of their odd behaviour; and sure enough, it didn't take long for them to start picking on someone the second they came across another person on the street.

He made the quick decision to intervene before any outright violence could occur; the young woman they were harassing already seemed prepared to lash out if she had to. He jumped down behind the group where she could see him, giving her a silent thumbs up before kicking the two closest to him in the back of the knees.

"What the fuck—"

"Theseus!"

Tommy didn't hesitate to engage as the others of the group whipped around in surprise. His body was already thrumming with adrenaline and magic in anticipation of the fight, and he was happy to let loose as the woman made her escape. He punched one guy right in the nose, almost wincing at the crunch beneath his fist and the shout that followed, and ducked beneath an incoming swing, kicking out the aggressor's legs.

He sprung to his feet again, seeking out an opening to attempt one of SBI's moves. He was eager to give their combat styles a try, even if he only had a half-developed idea of how to perform each manoeuvre.

He was barely given the chance to glance around, however, before an outrageously strong gust of wind knocked him right back on his ass, sending him flying down the footpath.

Of course. *Enhanced*.

Tommy jumped back to his feet with the aid of his magic, struggling to identify the air elemental among the many individuals charging at him. Panicking a little at the sheer number of opponents, he made a wide sweeping motion with his hand, creating a wave of magic that sent the group tumbling.

All except one, who used his manipulation of wind to steady himself.

Gotcha, bitch.

Tommy decided to tackle the enhanced first, given the rest of his gang was still struggling to their feet. Recalling Phil's tip about momentum, he used his magic to shoot forward, feigning a punch before grabbing onto the man's shoulders and swinging the rest of his body right around. He wrapped around the guy's waist the way Phil had Techno, trying desperately to recall how Phil had flipped the hybrid onto his back — unfortunately, he spent too long in thought.

The enhanced flung him off with a harsh twist, throwing him right up into the sky with an accompanying hurricane-force gust of wind. Tommy caught himself midair, magic surging as he hovered for a moment above the ground.

Huh, this is new, he realised vaguely, before hurling a ball of magic at the guy's head. He sliced straight through it with another gust, and Tommy blinked in surprise. *As is that. Rude.*

Tommy used his magic to propel himself back towards the ground; more specifically, right at the man's chest, which he kicked out at upon making connection. *That* finally had the enhanced on his back, hitting the ground with a hard thud and a groan.

Stay down, bitch, Tommy thought with a grin, wishing he could spit said words out.

He wasn't given much time to bathe in his victory as the rest of the goons made their move. He had to move quick to dodge the incoming fists, though stumbled as someone kicked him square in the back. He sent a ball of magic behind him without looking, focused on the two still in front of him. Another punch was thrown and he deflected it with his forearm as he'd seen Techno do earlier, smirking at his success. The next fist hit him right in the jaw, however.

If that bruises, I'm gonna break into prison and kill you.

Done with hand-to-hand already, he sent a blast of his magic forward, taking out the pair at once. Clearly, he hadn't quite dealt with whoever was behind him, as an arm was locking around his head before he could turn to acknowledge the person.

"Lights out, Theseus," a strained voice growled into his ear, as the arm squeezed tight around his throat and skull.

Tommy couldn't even suck in a breath as the guy choked him, trapped by the headlock. The magic he was throwing desperately back wasn't hitting its mark; his opponent was too close.

But he'd watched Techno get out of a headlock just hours prior, hadn't he? A surge of determination cleared the growing panic in his head. He could do this.

He just about managed to tuck his chin into the crook of his aggressor's elbow, relishing in the sudden ability to breathe. He knew he had to be quick. Hooking his ankle behind the man's leg, he wrenched himself around in a tight turn, using his magic to increase the force at which he threw the other to the ground. With his leg caught, the man was left completely unbalanced, and toppled. Tommy pinned him down hastily, pulling out his zip ties.

The man struggled hard against Tommy's weight, his fall not having incapacitated him enough for him to give in. He managed to flip over onto his back, and Tommy froze as he met a pair of strikingly red eyes.

"Take a picture, it'll last—"

Tommy decked the guy straight in the face, knocking him out cold before he could utter another word. *Red eyes... that's odd.*

At the same time, two pairs of footsteps sounded behind him.

Tommy whipped around, muscles tense and magic surging as he prepared for another fight; yet he faltered as recognition kicked in upon seeing the two approaching him.

One of them was the Blade. The other, telltale green hair peeking out over a gas mask, was Awesamdude.

Beneath his own mask, Tommy's jaw dropped at seeing Sam in full hero gear. Following this reaction was the onset of panic upon remembering that Sam was fluent in sign language. Tommy had been practicing daily, but he was nowhere near fluent, for a vigilante who claimed to be nonverbal.

"Hello, Theseus," the Blade greeted him casually, as if they weren't standing on the street surrounded by unconscious bodies. He signed as he spoke, before slipping off his mask.

Tommy wondered if Techno was aware of the comfort that offered him. It certainly relieved some of the tension, when Tommy was able to look him in the eyes and read his expression.

"Hello," he signed in return, letting his magic relax back into him and hoping his hands weren't shaking as he glanced between the pair nervously.

Sam followed Techno's lead in removing his mask, and Tommy released a strained breath.

"Nice to meet you, Theseus," Sam greeted with a smile. He didn't have to slow his speech at all, as his hands kept up with his words without struggle. If not incredibly intimidating, it was impressive. "I'm Sam, though you probably know that already."

"I do," Tommy replied.

Keeping his responses short and sweet was probably the best way to avoid giving himself away. As long as he could interpret Sam's hand movements quick enough, and the man spoke as he signed, it would be fine.

"We watched you fight," Sam explained casually. "It was impressive."

"You've gotten better since I saw you last," Techno added. "Hand-to-hand especially."

"Thanks," Tommy signed back. He wasn't about to admit that he'd been inspired by Techno himself, as well as the other two parts of SBI, after analysing their sparring session that very day. Thankfully, he didn't have to mention that at all.

"Though there's still room for improvement," Techno continued with a small smile. "You're slow and unbalanced."

Tommy made a face under the mask. Just one compliment was too much to ask for, huh?

"Thanks," he signed again, hoping the sarcasm was well conveyed.

Sam chuckled. "Nevermind Techno. He's right, but you did well. And...." He paused, slipping a small backpack off. Tommy felt a rush of excitement. "I've accompanied him today to bring

you something."

Tommy was struggling not to bounce on his heels in anticipation of the gift. *"What is it?"*

My suit my suit my suit—!

"It was Technoblade's suggestion," Sam admitted with a smile. "Told me you needed an upgrade."

"But Sam made it, so give him some credit too," Techno chimed in.

Sam handed Tommy the backpack and Tommy eagerly unzipped it, pulling out the suit inside. His excitement was overwhelming as he held the suit at arm's length, eyes huge as he took in as much of it as possible.

Primes, it was *perfect*. It had some resemblance to his current hoodie and pants, keeping the image he'd already made for himself. Yet the material was much more durable in his hands; thicker and stronger, but sleek and flexible, just as he'd asked Sam to prioritise. Experimentally, he pushed some magic through the fabric; it wasn't withheld or obstructed at all by the material, which was ideal.

"It's not bulletproof, so do take care," Sam was saying, and Tommy just about managed to tune in again, glancing over at the heroes. "But it's a great deal more protective than what you're currently wearing. I've added a couple things, if you'll allow me...."

Tommy let the man take the suit into his own hands, taking a wary step back to maintain the distance between them.

"These," Sam explained, gesturing to the curved metal components on the suit's upper legs, "are interactive screens."

Tommy's eyes widened in surprise as one of the screens lit up a light blue as Sam tapped it. He hadn't requested that, exactly, but it was beyond cool.

"They're blank now, but when you're wearing the suit, they'll read your vitals, show you your location on a localised map, that kind of thing," Sam explained. "The map will also ping locations of reported crimes, as I've coded the suit to tune into and translate police frequencies. And there's also an emergency button, if ever you need real help."

Tommy nodded seriously, and then supposed he had to ask questions if he really wanted to sell his surprise at the gift.

"What does the emergency button do?" he asked, hesitating slightly on the sign for 'emergency'. Fingers crossed, Sam hadn't noticed his slip-up.

Techno understood, at the very least. "It's connected to my suit and phone," he replied. "As well as my teammates'. We'll be notified immediately if you're in trouble, and send someone out to help you."

My teammates, Tommy thought scornfully. *That's awfully vague of you, Technoblade*. He was fortunate enough to be in the position that he knew Wilbur was hooked up to the button as well, and could hence avoid using it at all costs.

Sam handed the suit back, and Tommy stuffed it into the backpack again, beyond keen to try it on and show Ranboo once he got home.

"Thank you so much," he signed once he had straightened again, buzzing in anticipation. *"It's amazing."*

Sam grinned. "No problem, Theseus. I hope it serves you well."

"Before you go," Techno chimed in, apparently sensing Tommy's eagerness to leave, "any updates on crime around here? Increased violence? I, uh, have a friend who lives in the

district, he mentioned something about it to my teammate."

Ah, so Wilbur had already confronted Techno about patrolling in fourteenth, and everything else Tommy had talked to him about, evidently. He let his mild irritation with Wilbur's gossip push down any mushy feeling that had raised its head at being referred to as a friend.

Primes, it was odd hearing Techno talk about him when he was right there.

"Definitely increased violence," he agreed, wary that short answers were more difficult to pull off now. *"Mostly groups of people. Gangs, I think. Some people on their own, though, too."*

For a moment, he debated bringing up the red eyes of the man who was still lying on the ground a few feet away, but decided against it. They'd caught him off guard, sure, but it was probably nothing. Ranboo had a red eye; the guy was probably just a hybrid or something, and he didn't want to create a problem out of nothing.

He ignored the feeling in his gut that he was forgetting something vital, and nodded his head.

"That's about it. Most of them fight with their fists. A few enhanced."

Techno nodded thoughtfully. "Thank you, Theseus. If ever it's too much to handle...." He tapped his thigh, where the screens on Tommy's suit would sit. "Let me know straight away. You're doing good out here, but don't let it overwhelm you."

Tommy gave the man a grateful nod, and slung the backpack over his shoulder. *"I won't,"* he promised.

Techno smiled, and fixed his mask back in place. "See you around, then. I'll come by again soon."

"Was nice meeting you, Theseus," Sam said politely.

"You too," Tommy returned, and acknowledged Techno's signature two-fingered salute with one of his own.

The hero grinned, and Tommy let his magic boost himself up onto a rooftop, making his way straight home. He couldn't wait to try the new suit on; between that, and the fact that he'd now had pleasant, non-threatening meetings with two official heroes as Theseus, he was beginning to feel like a real hero himself.

Chapter End Notes

shoutout to pinkie for the opening line and shoutout to mayx for your idea with the training room and shoutout to literally everyone in the [discord](#), you're all so cool <3

also!! i have final exams coming up so for the next few weeks updates are going to be very spotty, if there are any at all! i hope you all understand akdhs and once i'm finally done with school we'll be back to frequent updates <3

Stories and Secrets

Chapter Summary

Tommy gets a chance to talk to Tubbo again, and has an unfriendly encounter in the Watchtower.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for [notes](#)

"Yeah, Dad was never really one for bedtime stories."

Tommy chuckled softly into his phone where it was tucked between his shoulder and his ear. His arms were occupied at the moment, a cardboard carrier of warm drinks in one hand and a bag of sugary goods in the other. Personally, he didn't think the café he'd been sent to was any better than Bad's had been, or Niki's bakery, but SBI insisted it was their go-to in first. Wilbur had wanted to go with him to collect their order, but Phil made the man stay and file out his latest mission reports before he fell behind again.

They were celebrating the final approval of Phil's vigilante training program. After fighting long and hard for it, all the meetings with the council and then the lengthy waiting period afterwards, he had finally been given the go-ahead to start organising the program, and he was over the moon about it. Tommy was surprised by Phil's enthusiasm, but the man genuinely seemed to want to help vigilantes across the city.

Wilbur was still... indifferent about the news, but wasn't storming out of the room this time, at least. And Tommy, knowing the truth, could find it in himself to be sympathetic with the hero's situation.

Tubbo had called as Tommy was leaving the café. Tommy, still having a little ways to walk back to the tower, had decided there was no harm in entertaining the boy until he had to get back to work. Besides, he had missed talking to Tubbo.

"Are bedtime stories an actual thing?" he asked, curious. "Any foster parents I ever had never told me stories before bed, or whatever. I guess maybe I was too old."

"Maybe," Tubbo's voice buzzed. "It was usually Mum who'd tuck me in when I was younger, and she'd tell stories sometimes. For a while after she died, Dad tried to as well, but he was never as good. I guess he knew that himself, because he stopped a long time ago."

"Ah," Tommy remarked. "That... sucks."

"Yeah, it does," Tubbo agreed, though his tone remained as bright as ever. "I really only remember one story properly. You probably know it, though — the one about where enhancements come from. The one everyone hears as a kid."

"Enlighten me," Tommy said with a grin, "I never heard any stories."

"Alright," Tubbo agreed happily. "Pleased to be your introduction to the world of bedtime stories!"

"Pleased to have you," Tommy laughed. Tubbo was easy to talk to, and fun to listen to as well. He could have been telling Tommy anything and Tommy would have given him his full attention.

Tubbo let his voice drop to a low, dramatic murmur. *"Have you ever heard of the tale of the Great Giver?"*

Tommy raised an eyebrow, despite the fact that Tubbo couldn't see him. "I just told you I haven't heard of any of these—"

"It was rhetorical, Tommy, I'm trying to tell the story the way Mum did," Tubbo laughed. "Anyways, as I was saying — the tale of the Great Giver and the Rua is a story passed down from generation to generation, just as the magic was—"

"What's the Rua?" Tommy piped up, pressing the button by a crosswalk with his elbow.

"I'm getting there!" Tubbo exclaimed with a snort. *"You're not a very good listener."*

Tommy grinned. "Talking is my specialty."

"The Rua was the name given to a group of people way back. When there were no enhancements in the world, the Rua were the only ones capable of using magic," Tubbo explained. *"But there's a catch — of all the Rua, there was only ever one alive at a time. They guarded their knowledge very carefully, only passing it on to the next generation when the previous could no longer hold it."*

Tommy snorted. "Sounds kinda pretentious. How were they able to use magic, but nobody else was?"

"They manipulated the world around them to their will," Tubbo said, lowering his voice for added effect. *"In doing so, they were capable of harnessing insane powers, never seen before."*

"So enhancements, basically."

"Sort of," was Tubbo's cheery reply. *"Except rather than being born with these powers, they stole them. And with their power, they were capable of doing whatever they wished. Nobody could stop them or get in their way; they were an immovable force."*

"Alright," Tommy commented. "Sounds kind of unfair."

"It was, and a lot of people would have agreed with you," Tubbo continued. *"This is where the Great Giver comes in. His true name has been lost to time, but he was a man who was*

determined to put an end to the Rua's reign over the world. He saw the injustice in their power hoarding, and decided to do something about it."

"He was hardly the first."

"Yeah, probably not," Tubbo agreed, and Tommy could hear the smile in his voice. "But he was at least the first successful person, because he's the one in the story."

"Makes sense," Tommy remarked, hurrying across another road. "Go on, then."

"The Great Giver infiltrated the ranks of the Rua. He spent the greater half of his life ensuring that he would be the one the Rua at the time chose to pass their knowledge onto — but in the end, he wasn't. He knew he couldn't wait another generation, so he snuck into the room when the Rua was explaining everything to the one they'd chosen," Tubbo continued, and Tommy listened with rapt attention. "He was found out, but not before hearing everything. A great battle ensued. The Great Giver was an excellent fighter, and he was able to hold his own for some time — but he was no match for the combined power of the two Rua."

"He died?" Tommy asked, baffled.

"Obviously not, if you'd let me finish," Tubbo laughed. "Just as the Rua were about to finish him, the Great Giver cracked the code on taking power from the world. As he was hit by their magic, he absorbed it, and made it his own. He was able to escape with his new abilities and knowledge, which he spread across the world, to any who would listen."

"Some man," Tommy noted with a chuckle.

"Yeah!" Tubbo agreed enthusiastically. "Pretty soon, there were loads of people practicing magic. Some branched out and took control over the elements of nature, while others turned within, changing their own forms and shapes. These were the early hybrids."

"Pog."

"After a few generations, magic became so widely used that it was ingrained in our very DNA. Babies were born with powers and hybrid features. Soon afterwards, the term 'enhancement' was coined, and that brings us to where we are today."

"What happened to the Great Giver?" Tommy asked, genuinely curious. So what if he was enjoying a bedtime story for kids — it was interesting, okay? "And the Rua?"

"Well, the Rua ceased to exist once everyone started using magic," Tubbo explained after a thoughtful pause. "There's no point in passing on knowledge that's already available to the public. And the Great Giver — I dunno, I guess he died or something. He wasn't immortal, just some man who changed the world."

"It's not all true, is it?"

Tubbo laughed. *"No, probably not,"* he admitted. *"Enhancements can't be taught to humans, so that doesn't really line up."*

"Yeah," Tommy agreed. He grinned. "Cool story though."

"Yeah, I guess it is," Tubbo chuckled. *"I can't believe you didn't know it. The Great Giver and the Rua is a staple part of anyone's childhood."*

"To be fair, I think I blocked out most of my childhood," Tommy laughed.

"Yeah, I get that," Tubbo said lightly. *"I think I did some of mine, too. But there were a few good parts."*

Tommy smiled. "I'm glad, Big T—"

"Shit, I gotta go," Tubbo cut him off, the volume of his voice lowering immediately. "Dad's calling me."

"That's okay," Tommy replied, a touch of concern for the boy making itself known in his chest. "It was nice to talk to you again."

"You too," Tubbo said quietly, and his smile still sounded through his words. "I wish we could talk more. Bye, Tommy."

"Talk to you soon."

Tubbo hung up the call, and Tommy had to pause and set down a bag to put his phone away. As he did, he noticed a text from Phil.

Floor sixty-three, meet me there.

Tommy sent the man a thumbs up in response, before pocketing his phone. He had no idea what was on floor sixty-three, but it was definitely lower than all of the hero-specific floors, and probably a lot larger. The Watchtower was only around the corner, at least, so he wouldn't be waiting in anticipation for long.

He hoped Tubbo was okay. He hadn't seen very much of Schlatt while in the southern city, but between the bad vibes he had picked up from the man and the whole drinks controversy, he didn't trust him in the slightest. Tubbo especially seemed uncomfortable around his father, and Tommy could only hope Schlatt wasn't as shitty a person as he seemed to be.

Tommy arrived at the Watchtower within a couple minutes, and after nodding a greeting to Hannah at the front desk, he made his way dutifully to the elevator and input his new destination. Most of the floors were still new him; SBI's floor was, of course, where he spent most of his time, and second to that was probably the main science and research floor where Sam's lab was. He'd visited a few others briefly for various tasks, whether alone or in the

company of one of the three heroes he worked with; but the tower was a building of countless floors and there were far more that he had yet to venture on. Sixty-three was one of these.

The elevator doors opened up at the centre of a long, empty hallway. Tommy wasn't sure what he'd been expecting, but it wasn't quite this; sixty-three felt like a narrower version of the hotel he'd stayed in in the southern city. A simple, carpeted floor stretched out in both directions as well as in front of him until it hit the building's outer walls, numerous closed doors at regular intervals.

Most importantly, Phil was not here.

Tommy double checked the number over the elevator doors; it was, indeed, the sixty-third floor. It was also deathly quiet, with not a soul to be seen.

He didn't really have many other options, and wasn't bothered texting Phil when the man would probably appear out of nowhere within the minute, so he decided to walk. Admittedly, there wasn't much to see unless he started opening doors, but with his hands occupied with bags, he wasn't bothered. Letting his legs move at least gave him something to *do*.

And then, just as he was about to pass another door, it was flung open and hit him right in the face.

Tommy yelped in surprise as the force unbalanced him, and he couldn't catch himself and save the drinks and food at the same time. He landed flat on his ass, wincing at the dull pain, and glanced up to identify who had knocked him over.

He faltered. It was *Dream*.

And Dream looked fucking *pissed*.

Still, Tommy was half expecting an apology; he *had* fallen over. But what he got instead was: "watch where you're going," spat at him, the hero's tone laced in venom.

Dream's mask covered his expression as always, but the tension in his muscles and his clenched fists were a clear indication of his anger. Someone had royally pissed off the top hero.

And the top hero was about to royally piss off TommyInnit, if he kept up his attitude.

"Hey, you're the one who fuckin' knocked me over," Tommy snapped, struggling to get to his feet with the bags in hand. It was a miracle the drinks hadn't spilled.

Dream's head tilted ever so slightly, and Tommy could physically feel the burn of the glare he was being regarded with. But the hero reached forward and grabbed his wrist regardless, and even if his grasp was a little rough, he did help pull Tommy up again.

"Thanks," Tommy muttered, straightening his clothes as best as he could with his hands full.

To his surprise, Dream was as stiff as a board when he glanced up again. The hero had become impossibly more tense, hand frozen where it was outstretched. Tommy blinked, baffled.

"You, uh, good there, Big D?"

In an instant, Dream snapped back to life, fury returning tenfold. Tommy nearly stepped back in surprise, admittedly nervous as he registered the waves of hot anger sourcing from the man.

"Fuck off," Dream snarled.

Tommy nearly recoiled, nose scrunching up in distaste. Only nearly. He wasn't about to take shit from anyone when he'd been having a good day so far; he didn't care if it was the number one hero or not.

"What the fuck?" he retorted, skin prickling, and had to carefully calm his magic. "You literally just whacked me with a door—"

"Tommy, right?" Dream asked, voice deceptively sweet. He didn't give him time to respond. "What are you even doing here? Shouldn't you—"

"I fucking work here, man!" Tommy cut him off, bristling. "I literally went on a trip with you — which, by the way, when did you get back from Schlatt—"

"My business with Schlatt is none of yours," Dream snapped, voice rising in volume. "You're just a fucking assistant."

"I'm a person, dickhead, and I'd like to be treated like one. I don't care who spat in your coffee this morning."

The mask glared down at him, but Tommy refused to back down. He hadn't even done anything, for fuck's sake — and Dream was being an almighty prick for no fucking reason. He was one straw away from punching the man, his own frustration quick to rise.

"You're in my fucking way," was all Dream said, before pushing roughly past him.

He hit Tommy's shoulder hard with his own, and the fresh bruise under his shirt throbbed. There went the last straw.

"Hey, dickhead!" Tommy shouted at the hero's turned back, dropping his bags. Dream whirled around, fists clenched, but he was clearly unprepared for the fist already mid-swing. Tommy decked him right in his stupid fucking mask, a rush of satisfaction flowing through him as Dream stumbled back in surprise.

"You little *fucker*—"

"What the hell is going on here?"

Tommy faltered.

Oh, *fuck*.

Any frustration or satisfaction from the encounter drained straight through the floor upon hearing Phil's cold, demanding voice from behind him. The heated emotions were replaced with an intense, chilly regret, and to some degree, fear. He'd fucked up big time on this one.

"Your *assistant* just attacked me," Dream spat, his own rage clearly still present. "He should be fired for this, you realise."

Tommy slowly turned around. Phil's wings were flared as he stormed up the hallway, expression stony and impossible to read. Tommy felt a shiver of anxiety run up his spine and let his gaze fall to the floor, unable to meet his employer's.

"And as he is *my* assistant, *I* will deal out the necessary discipline, not you," Phil returned, tone cold. "I believe you were looking for George and Sapnap? Floor ninety-two."

Dream stalked off without another word, and Phil and Tommy were left alone.

Tommy barely registered the subtle tremble running through his body until Phil placed a hand on his shoulder, settling it. He still tensed at the gesture regardless, fear rooting itself deep into his core. He was going to lose his job — he *couldn't* lose this job, couldn't afford to, for one; couldn't bear to see the look on Ranboo's face when he broke the news; couldn't deal with the loss of interaction with Wilbur and Techno and Phil.

"I'm sorry," he stammered, hating how weak his voice sounded, how desperate.

"It's alright," Phil replied quietly. His thumb was rubbing firm but grounding circles into Tommy's shoulder.

Tommy glanced up at the man in genuine surprise. How the *fuck* was any of this alright? He was about to be fired, about to lose everything. "I — I beg your pardon?"

Phil's posture had relaxed in Dream's absence, his wings folded neatly behind himself again. His facial muscles were much less tense now, too, and he even cracked a reassuring smile at Tommy's distraught expression. This threatened a flare of anger in the teen's chest; Phil wasn't seriously about to fuck with him, was he? To feign kindness before dropping a bomb on his life?

"Well, I'm assuming you didn't just punch Dream for the thrill of it," the older mused, and was that a twinge of *amusement* to his words? "Are you okay? Did he hurt you?"

Tommy could barely bring himself to answer, completely thrown off by Phil's behaviour. Primes, he didn't understand this man.

"You're — you're not going to fire me?"

Phil actually laughed aloud at that. Tommy clenched his jaw.

"Fire you? Certainly not, Techno and Wil would kill me," he chuckled. "Provided you didn't lash out for no reason, I don't intend on taking any disciplinary action at all."

Tommy's mouth was gaping; he still couldn't wrap his head around the situation. It didn't make sense. How could Phil be so sure that Tommy had done no wrong? He had literally punched Dream first; the hero had done nothing *physical* to warrant it. *Besides brushing into my bruised shoulder, and whacking me with a door.*

Phil had his phone out, and had typed out and sent a text before Tommy could even register what he was doing.

"I'll just ask the boys to pull up security footage, and we'll have a look real quick when we get up to the floor," Phil explained, and picked up the bags Tommy had brought all the way from the café. "At the very worst, I'll consider it your first strike. But you won't be losing your job over a small altercation, Tommy, Prime knows what we'd do without you."

Tommy was, for once, utterly lost for words. *Small altercation?* his mind echoed helpfully. *I attacked the number one hero!* What the fuck had he been thinking?

The elevator ride up to floor eighty-seven was mostly silent, as Tommy tried to reason with his irritatingly pessimistic thoughts. He was filled to the brim with nervous energy, and it took everything in him not to start bouncing a leg as he stood awkwardly at Phil's side. Maybe he did need to blow off steam in the training room.

"Sorry for not finding you sooner," Phil said conversationally, as if Tommy wasn't the one who needed to apologise. "I was in a meeting to wrap up some details on the training program, and I wasn't going to stop you on the way, but someone brought these really nice muffins in — I thought they'd be nice to bring up with what else you got, and I knew you had bags."

Tommy could only hum in agreement, not sure his brain was fully comprehending the man's words.

Laughter, to Tommy's surprise, was what greeted them as the doors opened on their floor; loud and unapologetic laughter. Phil exchanged an amused glance with Tommy, and the pair made their way towards the living area curiously. Wilbur and Techno were perched on the couch, in stitches over whatever was on TV.

"Play it again, play it again," Wilbur insisted, smile wide as he watched the screen. Techno pressed a couple buttons on the remote, and whatever clip they were playing started over.

Tommy realised, with a mixed sense of dread and confusion, that it was the security footage of him and Dream.

Techno had restarted the footage right before Tommy punched Dream in the mask. The angle of the camera captured the hit perfectly, and there was a roar of laughter from Wilbur as Dream was sent stumbling back from the blow. Tommy felt a vague tingle of pride at his reaction.

"Primes, that's the best fucking thing I've seen all day," Wilbur breathed, wiping a tear Tommy wasn't sure was actually there. Then finally noticing the boy's presence, Wilbur met his gaze, and grinned impossibly wider. "Tommy! You fucking legend, get over here."

Tommy cast a wary glance at Phil, but the man just smiled and nudged him forward. Gingerly, Tommy approached the couch, and Wilbur happily pulled him down between him and Techno, slinging an arm around his shoulders. The touch was warm and comforting, and Tommy found any previous worry was slowly slipping away.

"Who taught you how to punch like that?" Wilbur asked gleefully, and to Tommy's great relief, the question seemed to be rhetorical. "Fucking hell, I wish I could see that bastard's face. He's had that coming for far too long."

"Your form is on point," Techno agreed, and despite his monotone voice, there was a glittering satisfaction in his gaze when Tommy met it. "Very well executed, I must say."

"Boys," Phil chided with a tired sigh, though was smiling nonetheless, "perhaps we shouldn't be encouraging violence within the tower."

"You have to admit that's the greatest thing to happen around here in ages," Wilbur retorted with a grin. He turned to Techno. "Hey, save that clip and send it to me, yeah?"

Tommy felt his ears burn red, but his own smile was steadily growing. This wasn't the response he'd anticipated at all; it was certainly better than what he'd been expecting, however.

Phil let out a long sigh, relenting. "Send it to me too, Tech, please," he said, and Tommy's heart did a loop in his chest. "For record purposes purely, of course."

Wilbur cheered. "I knew it, I knew you'd find it just as satisfying to see that green prick getting decked—"

"Dream could use being knocked down a peg or two," Phil admitted, rolling his eyes in amusement. "We probably should thank you, Tommy."

"I will if you won't," Wilbur enthused, and began gently shaking Tommy back and forth with the arm still wrapped around his shoulders. "Thank you Tommy, oh great Mr Innit, doing Prime's work within these walls—"

"Well, what can I say," Tommy chuckled, the amused statement more of a genuine question than he intended as he struggled for words. "He *was* being a dickhead, and I couldn't have that, y'know—"

"Was he?" Phil asked, smile dropping immediately. "Techno, play the clip again? The whole thing."

"Well, he did—" Tommy needed not say any more, as the footage of him getting knocked on his ass by a door came to life on the screen. He winced. It was a little embarrassing to watch back. "Yeah.... He was just being quite rude, really. I didn't mean to hit him, but I just... lost my temper."

"What was he saying?" Techno asked, frowning.

Tommy shrugged, face a little warm as the three's eyes focused on him. "Just... cursing at me, I guess. He seemed really angry. Said I was just an assistant, that I was in the way, um... that's about it."

"He is so lucky he's leaving straight away again, because if I catch him before he does, I'm gonna kill him," Wilbur stated.

"Wil!" Phil exclaimed, though didn't seem to be in total disagreement with the thought. "Please refrain from murdering your coworkers."

"He's hardly a coworker anymore," Wilbur scoffed. "Moving the whole Dream Team back to Schlatt's? Doesn't sound like he's coming back anytime soon."

"He's going back? With George and Sapnap?" Tommy asked, confused. "Why?"

Techno shrugged. "Dream hasn't said anything much to anyone about it," he answered gruffly. "Collecting his teammates is the only thing he came back for."

"I asked Puffy about it, but I've yet to hear a response," Phil added.

"I'm glad you took the opportunity to punch him today," Wilbur noted with a snort, giving Tommy's shoulder a light squeeze. His bruise ached, but it was a pain easy to mask.

"Proper clarted him, I did," Tommy replied, growing in confidence once again. Maybe this wasn't the biggest fuck-up of his life.

The heroes seemed amused by his vocabulary, as the three chuckled at his use of words. Tommy's chest warmed, and he couldn't have prevented the broad smile that crossed his face if he tried.

"Very embarrassing for Dream," Techno said with a grin.

"*Very* embarrassing," Tommy agreed cheerfully, and in the muddled blender of emotions his mind had been put through in the past few minutes alone, it just slipped out. "The number one hero decked by a sixteen-year-old? His reputation is on the line."

He was still chuckling at his own joke, and realised far too late that the rest of the room had fallen into an unnerving silence.

"Did you say *sixteen*—"

Tommy's heart dropped like a stone. "Did I say that?" he laughed nervously, brushing his hair out of his eyes as his hands reached for something, anything to do. "Ha, I meant eighteen, of course, my bad—"

"*Sixteen*?!"

"I gave you *alcohol*!" Phil cried, horror dawning in his expression.

"I didn't even drink that much, it's fine—"

"You gave him alcohol?!" Techno echoed, squinting at Phil.

Tommy chuckled nervously. "It was like, *one sip* of champagne, and I'm not a child—"

"You *are* a child," Wilbur corrected him. "I fucking knew it, you look way too young to be eighteen!"

"I am *not* a child," Tommy growled. "I'm the biggest man — I, uh, I have wives — so many wives—"

Wilbur wasn't listening. He pulled Tommy in closer to his side, rocking him back and forth with a smug grin. "Itty bitty baby man—"

Phil had gone very pale where he stood. Tommy fought out of Wilbur's grasp, raising an eyebrow at the older hero in confusion.

"The alcohol really is no big deal," he started, and Phil met his gaze.

"No, that's — Primes, Tommy, you've been working eight hours every day and you're a *minor*," he explained worriedly, rubbing at his forehead. "I have to reduce your hours—"

"No!" Tommy cut him off, panicked. "I... please don't."

"What?" Techno asked him, puzzled. "You hardly *want* to work that long everyday."

Tommy chewed on his cheek, sinking back into the couch. "I need the money," he admitted quietly. "And my roommate's not home for ages either, so it's not like I would have anything to do at home." *And I would miss spending time with you all. And I enjoy working here more than I've enjoyed anything in a while.*

"Your parents will kill me," Phil argued weakly.

Tommy barked a nervous laugh. "Yeah, well, you don't actually have to worry about that, because I don't *have* parents."

This statement was met with a painfully long beat of silence. Tommy let his gaze drop to his hands as his stomach knotted in discomfort.

"What...?"

"I'm an orphan," he explained quickly, awkwardly. "Yeah, uh, surprise! No parents, no family at all, so nothing to worry about there...."

He trailed off, noting the crumbled expressions of the three heroes around him. It wasn't that bad, was it? His life was all he'd known; he didn't think there was anything to pity about it. He got by fine.

"Shit, Tommy," Wilbur breathed, concern wrinkling his brow. The expression didn't suit him. "I'm sorry."

"Nothing to be sorry about, s'alright," Tommy said with a shrug. "It's just the way it is, y'know."

The room was horribly quiet. Tommy bit his cheek hard and turned to Phil, reluctant to plead any further but determined not to lose any hours.

"It's fine, Phil, really," he insisted. "I knew what I was doing when I applied for the job. My files are all in order — if something comes up, none of you know I'm a minor, and I'll take the blame. I'll take more breaks if you want, just...."

Phil let out a tired sigh, pinching the bridge of his nose. "Primes, I'm gonna go grey by next year," he deadpanned, but relented. "Alright mate. But definitely more breaks, and if anything does come up, you are *not* taking the blame."

Tommy smiled. There was no way in hell he'd let SBI take the fall in such a situation, but he could work with this for now. "Thank you."

"Sixteen," Wilbur was murmuring, mostly to himself. He caught Tommy's irritated gaze and grinned. "You're *tiny*, Primes—"

"I will still break your legs," Tommy threatened.

"Yeah, we know he has a good punch, anyway," Techno added, raising his eyebrows at Wilbur.

Tommy glanced back to the TV screen, where the security footage was paused on the frame where his fist collided with Dream's mask. He grinned to himself.

"How about those muffins, then?" Phil said, clapping his hands together almost reluctantly as colour slowly returned to his face. "And everything else Tommy got for us."

"You didn't steal muffins from a meeting *again*, Phil, did you?" Wilbur teased, and laughed at the man's guilty expression. "Primes, you have an addiction."

"They're *good*," Phil argued weakly, though was smiling nonetheless.

Tommy leaned forward to help unpack the contents of the bags he'd brought up, and despite the fact that his head was still reeling with nerves that had yet to dwindle, there was a light, happy warmth rising in his chest. His shoulders felt lighter than they had in a while with the burden of a secret removed. Sure, Ranboo was going to *kill* him when he found out, but there was a bubbly excitement in his stomach that felt a lot like hope. Hope that maybe he could trust the heroes more than he'd thought; hope that they cared.

Chapter End Notes

discord i gave you muffinza pls let me out of the basement now /j skdhskshj

me: haha yeah gonna take some time off writing so i can study for exams *takes time off studying so i can write the fic*

In with the Old

Chapter Summary

Ranboo voices his thoughts on Tommy's relationships with SBI, and fourteenth faces a threat a little more serious than what Tommy is used to.

TW// mild descriptions of violence and injury, fire

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for [notes](#)

Letting slip to SBI that he was sixteen and had been lying about his age was certainly one of the bigger fuck-ups in Tommy's life. That said, the consequences that came with it weren't as severe as he'd been expecting.

First of all, none of them seemed to be angry at all about the fact that he'd been lying to their faces for over a month. This was... surprising, to say the least. On the contrary, they'd all been rather understanding of his situation.

"I get it, mate," Phil had said, still quite frazzled from the revelation but sympathetic nonetheless. "I do. You needed a job you were too young to apply for, so you faked some of the information on your CV. Many people would do the same."

"Yeah," Tommy had simply agreed, too nervous to say anything else. Not talking at all was probably the best way to avoid letting anything else slip.

"Primes," Phil sighed again, pinching the bridge of his nose. "I still can't believe — fuck, mate, eight hour shifts and you're *sixteen* —"

"It's fine," Tommy had said hurriedly, pulling at his sleeves. "I told you, I can manage—"

"But you shouldn't have to," Techno chimed in, voice monotone but concern evident in his eyes.

And that was the second thing — the breaks. Tommy had promised that he would take breaks more often to ensure that he got to keep his hours, but he hadn't fully expected to have to commit to that; yet SBI was insistent he take time off *regularly*.

"One hour off every two hours."

Tommy had gaped at Phil in disbelief when he'd first heard the suggestion. Given another second, he began struggling to count out what that meant on his fingers. On second thought, it wasn't the worst condition; overall, it meant he took two hours off over the course of each day, working six.

"And you'll still get paid for the eight," Phil had assured him, upon noting Tommy's concerned expression. "As long as you *do* take breaks."

"I'll even take them with you," Wilbur offered enthusiastically.

Phil was quick to shut down the man. "No, you won't."

Wilbur made a face. "That's so unfair."

"You're twenty-four, and you have work and responsibilities."

Tommy and Techno had snickered at that, and Wilbur shot them a glare that lacked any real fire.

The third thing was the most... problematic. It had taken SBI, or more specifically, just Wilbur, a little longer to bring it up than the breaks, but the inevitable conversation came around eventually.

"So your roommate," Wilbur had begun, far too casually for Tommy to feel entirely relaxed. "He's twenty?"

Tommy's heartbeat stuttered in his chest. *Fuck, okay*. He couldn't exactly let them know that he'd lied about that too when he'd already let one thing slip.

"Yeah," he agreed hesitantly, eyeing the hero. "He is."

Wilbur met his gaze steadily, and Tommy glanced away. "So... what, is he your guardian?"

Tommy panicked. "Uh, yeah."

"With only four years between you?" Wilbur pressed, eyes narrowing.

Tommy pulled at his sleeves, growing more uncomfortable by the second. This felt more like an interrogation than a conversation, and with every answer he gave, the web of lies was spun thicker.

"He got me out of the foster system," he explained reluctantly, because that was at least a half-truth. They'd gotten out together, he and Ranboo, but he still owed the boy a lot for all he'd done for him.

Wilbur had hummed in thought, and then Techno had approached and offered an out from the conversation for Tommy, which he jumped at.

That was for the most part the extent of the changes the reveal of his actual age had brought about. To his immense gratitude, the way SBI treated him otherwise was the same, with the small exceptions of Wilbur teasing him for being a child and Techno playfully threatening to put him in time out. He was still juggling the same workload as before, just with mandated

breaks. Things were okay; they knew he was sixteen, they hadn't freaked out, he hadn't lost his job. It was all good.

And then, that weekend, Ranboo found out he'd let his age slip. Among the other happenings of the week.

"You...." Ranboo trailed off, rubbing at his face tiredly. "You told them you're sixteen?"

Tommy winced; he'd known Ranboo wouldn't react well to the news, and though the other teen was still quiet, he could tell there was anger bubbling under his skin.

"I didn't mean to, if that helps," he replied, hasty to make his excuse. "My head was all over the place, man, because I punched Dream and I thought Phil was gonna fire me—"

Ranboo stared at him in disbelief. "You *punched* Dream?!"

"Listen — okay—" Tommy was struggling for words; yeah, the whole situation really didn't sound great when explained aloud. "He was being a prick! And I've just been so — I dunno, tense, from patrolling, and all the secrets and everything—"

"So you decided the best course of action was to punch the number one hero? And then reveal one of said secrets?!"

"It wasn't exactly a conscious decision," Tommy pointed out, wincing. "I wasn't thinking—"

"Clearly not!" Ranboo snapped, eyes blazing. "You — *Primes* — Tommy, you're not even trying to be careful!"

Tommy felt his own anger rising to meet the challenge. "I am trying! And I *am* careful! It was just *one* bad day, I'm allowed to have those—"

"One bad day?" Ranboo echoed, shaking his head. "And what about all the other things you've divulged? Using a training dummy in front of Techno? All the injuries they've seen?"

"They're all accidents!" Tommy retorted, frustrated. "I haven't done anything on purpose!"

"That's what I mean, you need to be more careful! It's like you *want* them to find out you're a vigilante."

Tommy glanced away, furiously quiet. Ranboo peered at him, eyebrows furrowed.

"*Do* you...?"

"No!" Tommy spat, bristling. He folded his arms, gaze still cast downwards. "But... they're good people, Ranboo, I dunno — maybe I could... maybe I can trust them—"

Disbelief weighed heavy in Ranboo's features. "Are you serious?"

Tommy bit his cheek, and didn't bother replying as Ranboo launched into another lecture, tail lashing.

"You've only known them a *month*, Tommy!" Ranboo chided, ignoring Tommy's weak mumble of "*it's been more than a month*." "You don't know anything about them! And it should certainly be the same the other way around. They're — they're your employers, not your friends; you can't just tell them everything, and *especially* not you being a vigilante—"

Tommy's anger flared. "What do you know about any of it! You've never even met them! I at least know them better than you do!"

"And what about the vigilante arrests? Or have you conveniently forgotten that your secondary occupation is *illegal*?"

"Phil and Techno are supportive of vigilantes, actually!" Tommy shot back, clenching his fists. "Not that *you'd* know."

"And what about Ghostbur? I don't suppose he would react so kindly."

Tommy flinched at the pang his heart gave at the thought, the pain catching him off guard. "I — *Wilbur* is coming around," he argued, but the words sounded weak, even to his own ears. "He let us make the suit."

"Oh, and let's not forget the *suit*!" Ranboo snapped, with a dramatic wave of his hands. "Who knows what they even put in there, Tommy? Did you think to check for a tracker?"

Tommy's shoulders slumped. "They — they wouldn't," he stammered. He wasn't sure who he was trying to convince.

"How do you think your little map works?" Ranboo pressed, though the sharp edge to his tone had at least dulled. "I just.... You don't know these people, Tom. Not really. You shouldn't give them your trust so easily."

"I — I know," Tommy said, faltering.

SBI were good people, right? They wouldn't... arrest him, right? Not even for being a vigilante. They hadn't fired him when he'd punched Dream. They had laughed at the footage and made sure he was okay, and when they found out he was actually sixteen, they had accepted it and adjusted his schedule and moved on.

Yet... he *hadn't* thought to check the suit for a tracker. And sure, Phil and Techno were relatively supportive of vigilantes, but were his lies so numerous that the truth would betray their trust? Was actively being a vigilante betraying Wilbur's trust?

His heart twinged. *Yeah, it is.* And Ranboo was right; he hid behind so many secrets that SBI really didn't know who he was. They had barely scratched the surface of the complex person that was TommyInnit. He could only assume that it was the same case the other way around.

"Maybe you should take a break from patrolling," Ranboo suggested, voice much softer now. "Take some time to clear your head and decide what this job means to you."

Tommy's head snapped up to glare at the boy, frustration returning in an instant. "Is that what all this is about? To stop patrolling? Or quit my job?"

Ranboo winced and glanced away, uncomfortable with the eye contact. "I — I just don't think it's good for you, trying to manage both, Tom, it's taking a toll on you mentally—"

"Are you fuckin' serious?!" Tommy shouted, and his skin buzzed as his magic rose in response to his anger. "Patrol — this job — they're some of the best things that have ever happened to me, I'm *happy*— "

"But you're *tired* ," Ranboo argued. "And more stressed than you've ever been—"

"I've been through worse," Tommy snapped. "I thought you of all people would know that."

"I do," Ranboo insisted. "I know, Tommy, I was *there* — through the orphanage, through foster, through everything. But I could help you back then, and now... I don't — I don't know what to *do*—"

"Then stay out of it."

Ranboo wilted, though Tommy held his glare steadily. Fuck, he couldn't stay in this room a moment longer. Marching into their bedroom, he grabbed his suit from the box in the corner and threw it into the backpack it had come in.

"Where are you going...?" Ranboo asked quietly, as Tommy stormed back through the kitchen.

"Out," he spat, and slammed the door behind him.

It was late evening in L'Manberg, and the sun had already disappeared behind the skyscrapers in the distance. As a result, the sky was still clinging onto its orange and pink hues, the light clouds above dusted lavender and gradually darkening from there.

It might have been chilly without the sun's warmth if Tommy wasn't being fuelled by the heat of his rage. He marched down the road with the backpack slung over his shoulders, jaw tense and fists clenched. Fuck, he didn't even know where he was going or what he was doing — he just had to get out of the apartment. He'd cool off and return later; though if he patrolled early and for longer, he wouldn't have to face Ranboo again until nearly nine o'clock tomorrow night....

No, that wasn't fair to his roommate. Ranboo would worry himself sick. And besides, as much as Tommy hated to admit it... he had a point. He *had* been too trusting of SBI, and he'd been letting his guard down, and he hadn't been careful. Despite everything... they really weren't his friends. It had been extremely childish of him to even indulge in the notion.

The thought, combined with the brisk, tense pace he'd been walking at, left him feeling drained. Tommy sighed, rubbing tiredly at his face as he slowed his speed. One of fourteenth's small parks was just around the corner; he would wait there until he was sure all his frustration had run its course, and then draft an apology to Ranboo in his head.

(For a brief second, he thought he heard footsteps behind him; but when he turned, there was nothing.)

He found a bench under a rather pathetic ash tree, and slumped into it with a groan. He left his backpack at his feet; he'd brought it on instinct, a patrol his preferred way of letting off steam, but now the suit felt more like a burden than a gift. Was there a tracker in it? Was being a vigilante worth betraying the trust of SBI? If he had to give up his powers or his job, which would he pick...?

A ratty looking squirrel scampered over to him, watching him through curious, beady eyes. *Fucking squirrels, happy to live their lives with no laws or secrets or jobs or stress.*

He scowled at it. "What are you looking at?"

"Are you talking to a squirrel?"

Tommy shrieked, jumping forward so much he fell off the bench. Ears red, he scrambled to his feet again, glaring daggers at the pricks that had snuck up on him.

Both suited up for hero duty, Wilbur Soot and Technoblade grinned at him.

"What the fuck?!" Tommy exclaimed, throwing an accusatory finger at the pair. "What do you think you're doing, creeping up on a man like that?"

"Can't we stop by and say hello to a familiar face?" Wilbur teased.

"Yeah, but give a guy a warning, Primes," Tommy muttered, and brushed off his jeans. His face warmed further as he noticed he wasn't wearing one of his outfits that he usually wore to the Watchtower; these clothes were more worn and tatty than he was entirely comfortable letting the two heroes see.

"What are you doing out here alone?" Techno inquired, raising an eyebrow. His mask was tucked between his arm and his side... and he had a blue mark on his nose, similar to the one Tommy had seen on Phil in the hotel. He stared at it for a moment, but saved the thought for later.

"I was just—" Tommy cut himself off, glancing suspiciously between the pair. "Hold on, shouldn't I be asking you two that? Especially *you*," he added, squinting at Wilbur. "Since when do you patrol fourteenth?"

Wilbur shrugged. "Caught Techno on his way out earlier, so I offered to join. Didn't have much else to do."

"By that he means he was very worried about you after hearing about increased violence in the area, and wanted to make sure it was safe for a sixteen-year-old," Techno said smugly. Wilbur elbowed him sharply in the side.

Tommy, despite how his cheeks flushed with mild embarrassment at the thought, opted to join Techno in teasing the man. "Aww, were you worried about me?"

"Shut the fuck up, I was not," Wilbur insisted, though his red face said otherwise.

Tommy laughed. "Well, rest assured. As you can see, I am perfectly safe and healthy."

"If healthy includes talking to squirrels," Techno deadpanned. Wilbur snorted.

Tommy made a face. "It was lookin' at me all funny."

"What *were* you doing out here though?" Wilbur asked, a tone to his voice that lay somewhere between suspicious and inquisitive.

Tommy bit his cheek. "I did tell you I go for walks around the city."

"Yeah, with a dog," Wilbur snorted, "whose existence I doubt more with every passing second."

"And most people who go for walks don't usually end up sitting down to yell at squirrels," Techno said with an air of amusement.

Tommy sighed heavily, and sank back down onto the bench. Fuck, he'd forgotten how stubborn the pair could be. There was probably no avoiding it, so it was easier to just get the conversation over with.

"I had an argument with my roommate," he admitted reluctantly.

Wilbur and Techno took a seat on either side of him, smiles fading.

"Are you okay?" Wilbur asked, eyebrows knitting together in concern.

"Yeah, yeah," Tommy said, waving him off. "It wasn't that bad, really. We just... haven't fought like that in a while. I had to get out and clear my head, y'know."

Wilbur frowned. Before he could say anything, though, Techno spoke up.

"What was the fight about?"

Tommy winced as his heart gave a pang. *About how I can't trust you and you're not my friends.* "I dunno if I can really say," he mumbled.

Techno made a low sound of acknowledgement. "No?"

"No," Tommy insisted, shaking his head. "He just... said things that were true, and I didn't want to hear them. I think I probably had to, though. He's always right."

"Not necessarily," Wilbur cut in, dead serious. "Your own perspective is just as valid."

Tommy frowned further; he knew Wilbur meant well, but it wasn't helping his mind figure out what to take from the argument. Sure, he did know SBI better than Ranboo — but did he *know* them? Were they really trustworthy? He liked to think so, but was that bias?

"Tommy?" Techno prompted him at his silence, voice uncharacteristically soft.

Tommy groaned, burying his face in his hands. "Fuck, I don't — I don't know," he admitted, all the tension leaving him in an instant as his shoulders sagged. "I can't figure it out, my head's fuckin' — all over the place. He's right but I don't want him to be, y'know?"

A hand was running gently through his hair. Tommy felt the anxiety eating at his stomach ease in response to the rhythmic motion, and sat up slowly, offering Wilbur a grateful smile.

"I dunno what we can do for you, Tommy, but if we can help at all, let us know," Techno said.

"Yes," Wilbur agreed, smile kind but words serious. "If you need to talk to us, or tell us anything, don't be—"

And that was when the building exploded.

The three shot out of their seats, Tommy's heart rate dialling up to one hundred as a huge black cloud of smoke rose from the cinema on the street opposite the park. Flames licked at the darkening sky from the now absent corner of the building. Screaming was quick to follow.

"Holy fucking shit," Tommy breathed, eyes wide. He'd seen some wild things on patrol in the district, but this was — fuck, this was *serious*. He could barely comprehend it.

Techno was already securing his mask back into place, and Wilbur had drawn his weapon, a shining rapier that was light in his hand.

"Tommy," the latter said urgently, laying a hand on the boy's shoulder, "I need you to get out of here. Is home safe?"

Tommy's mind was reeling; he barely processed the implications of the question. "Uh — yeah, what—?"

"Get somewhere safe, and stay there," Techno added, and then nodded to his teammate. "Wil, let's go."

The two took off running, and Tommy watched them for a moment, mouth opening and closing wordlessly. He shook his head, clearing his thoughts. He couldn't fucking go home now; this was *his* district. He had his suit. He could help.

Tommy raced over to the nearest alleyway he could find, practically tearing his suit from the backpack. If it was a little awkward to get dressed outdoors, the thought didn't even cross his mind. He was entirely preoccupied with the fact that his local cinema had just blown up and it was on fire and people were screaming and Wilbur and Techno were already on the scene and they could get hurt—

He was zipping up the suit barely a moment later and sprinting back across the park. It wasn't his first time wearing it, but Primes, did he love the feel of it; it was comfortable but secure, and the fit, having been modelled based on him, was perfect. Everything was a vast improvement down to the goggles; which had been slimmed down entirely, and were much clearer while still hiding his eyes.

Impatient, Tommy called his magic forward, launching himself across the grass with a hefty boost. The distance surprised even him, though he didn't linger on it as the smell of smoke hit him and the temperature began to rise. He didn't suppose the mask had a filter.

Wilbur and Techno were both still outside the burning building as he arrived on the scene. Tommy felt his heart drop as he saw Wilbur stoop to check a body on the footpath, though relaxed fractionally as the injured person responded to the touch, moving their arm.

Techno noticed him immediately. This time, he didn't remove his mask.

"Theseus," he greeted swiftly, stepping forward. "Paramedics and the fire department have been notified. Still counting the injuries outside; a few people got caught in the blast. Not sure if the building is secure to go inside yet—"

Oh, fuck secure! Tommy retorted in his head, brushing past the hero. *It's late evening on a weekend night — there were people in there for sure.*

Techno grabbed his shoulder as he passed, stopping him. Tommy met his gaze — as well as he could through the boar skull — and waited, anxious to get moving.

"Theseus, I don't know what we're gonna find in there," Techno said seriously, and Tommy's stomach knotted. "If you're going in, I'm going with you. Just be careful; we don't know if there's any bombs rigged, or if the structure will hold."

Tommy nodded in response. The risk was worth the reward of saving people. This was what he'd signed up for, after all. The destroyed wreckage of a building had been what prompted him to become a vigilante, and it wouldn't be what stopped him now.

"Ghostbur!" Techno called — and oh, yes, they used their superhero aliases in the field. "We're going in."

Wilbur glanced up from whoever he was tending to, and for a split second, Tommy felt cold fear run down his spine as they locked eyes. But then the hero gave a simple nod of understanding to Techno, and turned away again.

Tommy released a breath he wasn't aware he'd been holding. He supposed it made sense that Wilbur would prioritise injured civilians over a possible vigilante arrest.

"Let's go," Techno directed, and they faced the doors to the cinema.

Okay. Alright. Time to be a hero.

Techno pulled the front of his cape up over his mouth and nose as he kicked the door in; they were greeted with billowing smoke so thick it was difficult to see through. Tommy copied Techno's actions as the hero crouched a little, and indeed, it was a little easier to breathe closer to the floor.

"Check behind the counter," Techno instructed via sign language, his hands illuminated by the glow of a flame creeping across the carpet.

Tommy nodded, and watched as the hero turned for the screen rooms. He made his own way over to the ticket and snack counter, keeping as low to the floor as he could. Already his throat was burning, and his eyes watered beneath the mask.

There was a young man who couldn't have been much older than Ranboo lying still on the ground behind the cash register. Tommy's heart plummeted as he noted the trickle of blood from his temple, though was relieved to find a weak, rapid pulse as he checked his neck. Awkwardly and as carefully as he could, Tommy manoeuvred the guy over his shoulders and climbed back out over the counter.

The fire had by now spread to block the entrance through which they'd come in. Tommy might have tried it if he were alone; but with an injured man on his shoulders, he was slow moving and didn't want to risk burning either of them. He turned instead to the large window that faced the street; it was still intact, but maybe....

Tommy pressed his palm to the glass, chest heaving with strained breaths as he pushed as much of his magic into the window pane as he could. Then he stepped back, ducking and shielding the man's face, and let his power release; the glass shattered instantly, shards flying everywhere. Smoke began to leave the room at the new opening, and Tommy followed it hurriedly. He set the man down by Wilbur's feet and nodded to the hero.

Wilbur looked at him with an expression he couldn't decipher. Tommy didn't stick around to find out what it was.

He darted back indoors, fighting the instinct to cough and instead bringing his elbow up to offer more cover to his face. The fire was only growing by the second, and he hoped the firetrucks arrived soon, or he wasn't sure he'd be coming back out when he went in again. Tommy hopped the barrier to the screens, squinting to try and spot Techno.

The hero emerged from the smoke with a line of people behind him, each holding the shoulder of the person in front of them. The group as a whole was spluttering for breath, quite a few of them injured, and Techno was carrying another two who were unconscious.

"I've checked most of the screens," the hero rasped, unable to sign with his hands occupied. That was the fortunate thing about the cinema in fourteenth being so small; there weren't actually that many rooms. "The bathrooms aren't even there anymore; that's where the explosion came from. Just the screen next to them left."

Tommy nodded, glancing at the door to said room; it had almost completely collapsed, leaving a tight space he could probably squeeze through if he lay on his stomach.

The building around them groaned, and Tommy swallowed hard. He could only squeeze through if the walls actually stayed upright.

"Be careful," Techno added. "I'll be back as soon as I can."

He led the line of people towards the window Tommy had smashed. Tommy took a sharp inhale, and turned towards his own mission. All he had to do was sweep the room, make sure nobody was in there and get them out if people were, and then leave. Easy-peasy.

He dropped to his stomach at the collapsed doorway, and it should have been easier to breathe so close to the floor if it weren't for the smoke pouring through his only entrance. He couldn't help the harsh cough this time as he crawled through the tight space, the wood and concrete above tugging on his suit. He was sweating profusely beneath the material, and his throat and eyes were burning.

When he could finally stand again, he could barely see, between the darkness of the smoke and the blinding light of the fire eating at the opposite wall. The back wall, that would have

been nearest the bathrooms, wasn't even there anymore; he could vaguely make out the sky through the gap in the rubble. For the most part, the room seemed empty.

And then—

"Help! *Help!*"

Tommy's stomach knotted at the sound of the child's pleas, and he threw all caution to the wind. "Hello? Where are you?!"

"Help me!"

Tommy was just about able to make out a figure approaching him from the numerous rows of seats. He squinted; it seemed much too large for a child, but as the shadow drew closer, it slowly split into two. A young girl, pink dress tattered and blackened with ash, and — and....

Tommy's heart stopped. The world seemed to tilt on its axis.

"... *Bad?*"

It couldn't be — it didn't make *sense* — *how?!*

Bad had been missing for two months now without a trace, and suddenly showed up out of the blue in a building on fire? Where had he been? Was he safe? What had happened to him

Tommy's gaze fell to where Bad was grasping the little girl's arm in his hand. She was struggling against his grip, tears streaming down her face and hacking up coughs between words.

"Help — please—"

A horrible sinking sensation pulled at Tommy's insides. He met Bad's gaze again. The man's eyes glowed an eerie red through the smoke. They'd never been red before.

"Bad," he said again, voice hardened. "Let her go."

Bad laughed. It was a harsh, grating sound, so unlike the cheery personality of his former boss. A wave of nausea rocked Tommy's stomach. "I don't think I can do that."

Tommy summoned his magic to his fists. "I think you're gonna have to."

"Are you going to fight me, Tommy?"

Tommy flinched back, eyes widening. Sure, he'd been speaking, but he was still masked — was his voice really that much of a giveaway? Why wasn't Bad surprised? He'd never told him about his powers.

"Bad, stop it, this isn't you," he said, shaking his head in disbelief. "What happened to you? I can help, please—"

Bad laughed again. "There's nothing to help! I'm stronger now, and better than ever, can't you see?"

"Stop," Tommy pleaded, hating the tremble in his voice. His throat was searing from the smoke inhalation. "You don't have to do this — *did* you do this?" A terrifying realisation hit him like a train. "Did you do this to the *café*?"

"I was too attached to the place," Bad responded with a casual shrug. "And attachments are such a bother! It's much easier now, Tommy. You should join us."

"Join who?" Tommy rasped, clutching at his chest; he'd been talking too much. He could barely breathe.

Bad shot him an unsettling grin, and outstretched a hand. "Come with me, why don't you, and find out?"

Tommy weighed up his options as quickly as his brain could sort them, eyeing the hand warily. "Let her go first."

Bad's grin wavered. "A trade," he mused. "Fair enough. Come here, then."

"No, you let her go first," Tommy insisted, letting his magic flare. Scarlet energy flowed around his fists. "Or else it's not happening."

The grin disappeared, replaced with a scowl. Bad grunted his dislike for the terms, but pushed the child forward anyway.

Tommy was ready for it. In the same instant, he threw his magic straight at the chest of his former boss, and pulled the girl safe to his side with the other. Bad was sent flying by the powerful blow, falling down somewhere in the rows of seats. Tommy eyed the spreading fire warily; because fuck, he didn't want Bad to get hurt, but he really needed to get the hell out of here. The girl was sobbing into his side, clutching at his suit, and he ran a hand through her soot-coated hair in an attempt to soothe her.

He was running out of time. He didn't want to leave Bad behind — *what if he got killed in the fire? What if he went missing for two months only to finally turn up and die at the hands of his former friend and employee?* — but the window on his rescue was closing rapidly. The building gave another groan, and Tommy swore he felt the floor shift beneath him.

"Theseus!"

Tommy whipped around at the familiar call; Techno had shifted the rubble around the doorway, and he and Wilbur were standing there, staring at him.

Techno beckoned him urgently. "Come on! Let's go!"

Panic latched onto Tommy's heart with a vice-like grip, and he cast another glance back at where Bad had been. For a moment, he was confused, as the man was no longer there; but then he caught sight of a figure clambering out over the collapsed back wall, and let out a sigh of relief. *He's okay.*

Then the structure groaned once more, except this time, the sound was localised. Cracks splintered throughout the ceiling like spiderwebs.

Oh, Tommy thought vaguely, and the way out suddenly felt a million miles away, because he was never going to make it. *Shit.*

"No! Theseus—" Techno called, and Tommy had never heard such panic in the man's voice.

He glanced apologetically at the girl clinging to his side, and grasped her with his magic. She looked up at him with big, watery eyes — and he threw her with all the strength and power he could muster in the direction of the heroes.

Then the ceiling caved in, and someone was screaming at him, and the briefest flash of pain erupted in his shoulders before everything went dark.

Chapter End Notes

been looking forward to this chapter for a while i'll say that ;) shit is hitting the fan huh

HOPE YOU ALL ENJOYED <333 CHECK OUT THE [DISCORD](#) IF YOU'RE INTERESTED! and shoutout to all of you already in there you are truly the coolest people to hang out with i adore you all <3

Trust

Chapter Summary

Tommy struggles with the aftermath of the building collapse. Luckily, he's not alone — but it's a question of trust.

TW// fire, descriptions of injury, implied panic attack

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for [notes](#)

When Tommy's eyes fluttered open again, the first thing he became aware of was the overwhelming smell of smoke. It coated his mouth and throat, leaving them dry and sore, and when he coughed, a cloud of dust was expelled. His ears were ringing, and the world around him was a blur; his mind was slow to catch up with his surroundings, confusion and exhaustion clouding his thoughts.

The second thing he became aware of was the intense weight on his back and shoulders. It was this that kick-started his brain into action once again, and everything came flooding back.

The fight. The explosion. The fire. The girl.

...Bad.

A trembling panic ripped its way through his body.

The ceiling collapsing.

He inhaled shakily, and found he could barely breathe, chest unable to expand. He couldn't move at all, in fact. He was — fuck, he was still under the rubble — oh *fuck*, he was trapped.

Tommy's watery vision slowly pieced itself together, though there wasn't much to see. The air was thick with lingering dust and smoke. He could make out singed carpet beneath his chin; could feel the fibers through his gloves. He couldn't even lift his head to figure out what way he was facing.

He was *stuck* ; his head was stuck, his arms were stuck, his legs were stuck, he couldn't move he couldn't get *out*—

Techno and Wilbur. They had been there, they were — fuck, had they left? Surely not, surely they would help, even if he really was nothing more than an expendable vigilante that they would have had to arrest anyway once authorities showed up, surely....

"Help," he croaked, though the call wasn't nearly loud enough. His throat ached at the sensation of using his vocal chords, and the word came out barely louder than a whisper. "Fuck, please — *help*—"

A sob ripped itself from his chest, and his shoulders erupted in agony at the movement. The ringing in his ears worsened, panic rising. *Can't move please help trapped I can't move please*
—

Fuck, he didn't know what to do. He'd never taken a hit this bad on patrol before — never taken on a threat this bad before. He had thought he was ready for more, ready for bigger things, but Primes, now he was trapped under the rubble of a collapsed ceiling in a building still burning. He was fucked — he — oh *fuck* — what if he died here? What if the last thing he'd ever said to Ranboo was the petty shit in an argument he didn't mean?

Panic flared under his skin, knotting his stomach and sending a wave of adrenaline through his veins. He couldn't die — couldn't, not now, not — *fuck*, not without saying goodbye, not without a fight, at least.

His magic pulsed. It sourced right from his chest, warm against his heart, flooding his system with a shocking clarity.

He collected his breathing, newfound determination dulling the intense panic. He wasn't fucking dying. Not today. No thanks.

One deep breath; smoke burned his lungs and agony seared through the muscles in his back as he pushed up against the rubble for space to inhale. It was horrible; he didn't think he'd ever strained himself that far.

But it worked.

Magic strengthening him, Tommy took a second to breathe with the new inch of space he had gained. His entire body was shaking with the effort of holding himself up, but as he grit his teeth and continued pushing, he was eventually able to pull his knees in under himself.

A pain so hot and excruciating he wasn't sure he could actually register it had lit the nerves in his back on fire. He pushed through it. He *had* to push through it; he didn't have any other choice. He was TommyInnit, he was *Theseus*, he wasn't going to die, he was stronger than this. He had to be.

His magic was flowing through every cell in his body; he had never felt it so intensely. With great effort, he snapped his arms up over his head to help take some of the weight off of his back. His knees buckled and his body jolted painfully, but he steadied himself and kept pushing. He had to keep pushing. No matter what.

His vision was swaying and the ringing in his ears had risen to a scream; on second thought, maybe the scream had come from *him*, but he wasn't sure. All of his focus and energy was put into escaping the rubble. His magic was exploding the way it had when he'd been trapped on the ground by the men with the hammer, but a hundred times more intensely, flowing through and from him in powerful waves. He was on his feet now, trembling from the exertion, and then with one final push, he shoved the rubble away from himself enough to stumble forward and out of its path.

"Theseus!"

He barely registered the call. The world was swaying beneath him, exhaustion taking the forefront of his emotions as his magic began to withdraw.

"Theseus, shit—"

The words were clearer this time, closer, and as Tommy's legs gave in, there were arms there to catch his fall. He clung to their grip like a lifeline, shaking like a leaf. A lock of pink hair fell into his field of vision; *Techno* .

"Shh, shh, I've got you, kid," the man's voice rumbled, hoarse but kind, and Tommy could have cried. "You're alright now. You're safe."

The fire must have moved on from the room — either that or it had been extinguished. Regardless, it was secure enough that Techno didn't seem in a rush to get out; and it wasn't like there was any more ceiling to fall down on them.

"How the fuck is he alive?" another voice rasped, and Tommy tensed. *Wilbur*.

"I don't know," Techno replied softly. He nudged Tommy. "Theseus, there's paramedics outside, come on—"

Tommy shook his head vehemently, and Techno paused, staring at him.

"*They'll arrest me,*" he signed weakly.

"What is he saying?"

"They won't," Techno said, though didn't sound certain enough that Tommy was reassured. "I — they wouldn't arrest you, not now — you're hurt, and you need oxygen—"

"No," Tommy insisted, making the sign over and over. *"I can treat myself."*

"Primes, not for this!" Techno retorted, horrified. "You can barely stand, I'm not letting you go home."

Tommy ignored him, turning reluctantly to Wilbur. He had to know, before he left, if he hadn't failed at at least one thing. *"The girl? Is she okay?"*

"I — I don't...." Wilbur glanced at Techno. "What is he saying?"

"He asked about the girl," Techno replied quietly.

Wilbur blinked, turning back to face Tommy. "She's fine, no injuries, just smoke inhalation. You... um, you did good." He winced, as if the words hurt him.

Tommy understood why they would. Wilbur seemed horribly conflicted, expression tight; he was likely weighing up reasons to arrest him with every passing second.

Tommy's heart sank at the thought. He couldn't stay; he couldn't do that to Wilbur. His presence only made it more difficult for the man. And he had to get back to Ranboo, and apologise for the fight earlier. He couldn't get medical treatment here; not in front of the heroes, not under threat of arrest. He had to be more careful than that.

He had to go.

He said this much to Techno, who opposed the notion vehemently.

"Absolutely not," the hero insisted. "You could be concussed, you could — no, you are not going home by yourself, no way—"

"Techno," Wilbur rasped, cutting him off. "Let him go."

Tommy glanced at Wilbur, eyes widening in surprise. The hero didn't dare meet his gaze.

Techno, too, was staring at the man in disbelief, though for an entirely different reason. "Are you kidding—"

"You can't force him to stay," Wilbur argued, and then turned to Tommy, not quite able to look him in the eye. "Just... don't die, because I don't want to have to listen to the Blade whine about it."

In any other circumstances, Tommy might have laughed. He settled for a nervous smile, even if Wilbur couldn't see it.

Techno wasn't at all happy with the arrangement, mouth pressed into a firm line.

"Does this mean he likes me?" Tommy signed to him.

Techno's lips twitched. *"He's coming around."*

"It's my incredible charm."

"He's just a big softie."

Wilbur narrowed his eyes at the interaction, glancing between the pair. "What are you two saying?"

"Nothing," Techno replied. He nodded to Tommy. *"Please take care."*

"I will," Tommy assured him.

"Ghostbur! The Blade!" someone was calling, and flashlights were shining through the darkness of the smouldering building. "Philza is here. He's outside."

Phil, Tommy thought, heart rising with hope at the thought of the comfort the man would offer him. He quickly squashed it. He couldn't afford to seek comfort from Phil — and not even Techno or Wilbur, either. Because he was Theseus; and if they didn't know Tommy, they definitely didn't know him.

Tommy's chest felt tight, Ranboo's words from earlier echoing in his head. He couldn't trust them.

And now the entirety of SBI was in his district — in *Tommy's* district. He had to go.

He didn't give the pair an option to bid him a goodbye as he summoned his magic once again to support himself, making a beeline for the collapsed back wall. If Techno called after him, the words were drowned out by the incessant ringing in his ears. He couldn't turn back regardless; if he stopped moving and lost his momentum, he doubted he would have the energy to pick it up again.

His apartment wasn't far from the cinema, but it felt miles away as he struggled to cross the city. His limbs felt as though they were made of lead as he hopped from one rooftop to another, feet dragging across the concrete. His entire body ached with a pain deeper than he'd ever experienced.

Eventually, he was slipping in through the window to their small kitchen, upon which his legs promptly gave in as his magic fully exhausted itself. The fall resulted in enough noise that it brought Ranboo dashing out from their bedroom; his eyes were wide and damp and his two-toned hair frizzy, as though he'd been pulling at it.

"Tommy!" the boy exclaimed, voice high pitched with worry. "Primes, I — I saw the news, the cinema, and I knew you'd be there — I — *fuck* —"

Tommy waved away his roommate's panicked rambling, struggling to pull off his mask. His breaths were shallow and shaky now that his enhancement had completely withdrawn. The support and relief it had offered was no longer there, and he felt as though his back was on fire.

"Are you — are you hurt?"

Ranboo's hands reached out towards him gingerly, as if concerned that the lightest touch would result in pain. Tommy feared he was right.

"I'm sorry," he coughed out, cringing at the rasp the smoke had made of his voice. "About the fight, Ranboo — I'm so sorry."

"Primes, that — that doesn't even matter, Tommy," Ranboo cut in, easing the mask off for him. He winced at whatever sight lay beneath the fabric; Tommy suspected his face was covered in soot. "I shouldn't have gotten so angry anyway. It wasn't fair on you."

"You were right, though," Tommy admitted quietly. "About everything."

Ranboo's lips pressed into a thin line. "Doesn't matter," he insisted after a moment. "Not now. I'm sorry too."

"Don't — ah, *fuck* — don't be," Tommy replied, cursing as Ranboo gently manoeuvred his arms out of the upper half of the suit. The pain in his back and shoulders flared as the muscles contracted.

Ranboo didn't make any comments as he helped Tommy to his feet again, which the boy was grateful for. Every time SBI discovered another one of his injuries, their shock and horror

always made everything worse; but for as stressed as Ranboo was, he was at least quiet and calm.

Tommy sank carefully into the one chair in their apartment, leaning his front against the back of it to allow Ranboo access to his shoulders. He grit his teeth as careful fingers prodded and poked all around the area; he had no solid idea of what his back looked like given how widespread the pain was.

"You're gonna need stitches," Ranboo murmured regretfully, and Tommy's stomach knotted. "Not many, I don't think. But you've got two wounds on your shoulders that run a little deep."

Tommy just nodded, resigning himself to the situation. He closed his eyes. He was too tired to speak.

"I'll wash it off first," Ranboo said, and footsteps sounded to Tommy's right as the older boy made his way to their sink. "What... what happened in there?"

Tommy's heart skipped a beat. His entire body tensed momentarily, the ghostly presence of the rubble pinning him to the ground making a fleeting reappearance. Bad's face taunted him from his peripherals, illuminated by the red of his eyes. He could still hear Techno calling out for him.

"...Tommy?"

Gentle fingers brushed over his cheeks, which he vaguely realised were wet with tears.

"I fucked up." His voice wobbled.

"We don't have to talk about it right now, if you don't want to—"

"Bad's alive, Ranboo," Tommy cut him off, and took a gasping inhale, wincing at the burn in his back that followed. "And he's — he was—"

"Take your time," Ranboo said quietly. A washcloth passed over his shoulders, the coolness of it a stinging relief. Tommy clenched his eyes shut.

"He was *wrong*, he — I think someone's done something to him, Ranboo, he was — he was the one who did that to the cinema, and to the café."

The movement of the washcloth paused. "What...?"

"I had to fight him," Tommy continued, and his voice broke. "And then he ran off before — before...."

Ranboo's voice was quiet, and tight with concern. "Before...?"

"Before the ceiling collapsed on me."

Ranboo was still and silent for a worrying length of time. Tommy might have turned around to check on his roommate if he didn't think the movement would send agony ripping through his back.

"Oh Primes," Ranboo whispered shakily. "Tommy...."

"Yeah," Tommy murmured, and then a fit of coughs rose in his throat, which only brought more tears welling in his eyes.

"Okay," Ranboo said, exhaling slowly. "I'm just gonna stitch you up, and we have to wash all the ash off of you, and then I'm gonna go get pain relievers and something for your lungs, or at least your throat—"

"Pharmacy's closed at this hour," Tommy rasped. He knew they didn't have any of that sort of stuff at home.

Ranboo was quiet for a moment. "I know."

This in turn left Tommy baffled. He didn't reply for a second, confused, and then the realisation struck him. "Ranboo, *no*, you can't—"

"I'll teleport," Ranboo said. "In and out, it won't take a second and nobody will know."

"I would arrest you for that, if I was on patrol," Tommy argued weakly.

"Would you?" Ranboo challenged. "If it was some other guy stealing medicine to save his best friend?"

Tommy fell quiet.

"We can't afford it even if the pharmacy *was* open," Ranboo continued. "And you need it. If we can't go to a hospital, let me at least do this. Just this once."

Tommy nodded feebly, knowing all too well that Ranboo's mind was already made up. "Just this once," he agreed.

He let his mind drift as Ranboo patched him up, distancing himself from the sting of the needle passing through his skin. It wasn't the first time Ranboo had given him stitches, though felt no more pleasant despite the boy's improvement in efficiency and technique. Ranboo had become something of an expert in first aid the past couple of months, preparing himself for whatever trouble Tommy managed to get himself into. Even this.

He nearly fell asleep as gentle hands scratched at his scalp, the lukewarm water easing soot from his blonde locks and rinsing his face. When Ranboo finally left to go get medicine, sleep did overtake him, and he lay slumped against the chair until his roommate returned. Then he was awoken to take pain relievers, cough syrup and a few puffs of an inhaler before being moved to the mattress.

His sleep the rest of the night was fitful. Mostly because Ranboo set an alarm every two hours to wake them both, insisting it was necessary to check on Tommy's condition regularly in case he was concussed; but the pain in his back and shoulders didn't make falling asleep again each time any easier. By the time Ranboo woke him for the last time to leave for work, he was so groggy and sleep deprived he barely even noticed.

He *did* notice when, a few hours later, he was stirred from his slumber by a sharp knocking on the apartment door.

"Tommy?" a voice called, muffled through the walls of the building. "Are you there?"

Tommy's eyes shot open. Oh *fuck*, Wilbur.

His heartbeat kicked into speedrunner mode as he pushed himself into a sitting position, and he had to clamp a hand against his mouth to muffle the pained screech that ripped itself from his throat at the sharp stabbing sensation in his back. He pushed through it, stumbling to his feet and ripping off his pajamas as he did.

"Two seconds!" he called, clearing his throat and praying the rasp wasn't noticeable.

He threw on the first shirt and pants he saw on the floor, and kicked on his shoes as he staggered into the kitchen. A handful of pain relievers, a spoon of cough syrup, another puff of the inhaler and he was ready to face the hero.

There was a note on the door.

Don't go to work today, you need rest. Call me if you need anything, sorry I couldn't stay. I hope you feel better. -Ranboo

Tommy winced. He should have called the tower earlier — but it was too late now. Wilbur had already driven all the way here, and he couldn't exactly just... send him back. Besides, he'd be fine.

He opened the door.

Wilbur was sporting a few scrapes along his forearms and face, but seemed otherwise in good form as he raised an eyebrow at Tommy.

"You look like shit," the hero said, and Tommy sighed. He supposed the same couldn't be said for him.

"I slept like shit," he replied, and hurriedly closed the door behind him, before Wilbur could get a good look at the interior of his home. "Sorry for oversleeping. How'd last night go?"

Wilbur shrugged, letting Tommy take the lead as they headed down the steps towards his car. He had his own one again, a new car that didn't yet smell of coffee.

"Alright," he said. His voice didn't carry any of the rasp it had had the previous night. "Though I don't think your local cinema will be in business for another while, so sorry about that."

"Did you catch the guy who did it?"

Wilbur paused, shooting Tommy an odd look. "What do you mean, the guy who did it?" he asked slowly.

An uncomfortable chill ran down Tommy's spine. *Oh, they don't know.* "I dunno, I just kinda assumed it was a bomb or something," he answered carefully. "I mean, what's in a cinema that would cause an explosion *that* big, right?"

Wilbur hummed thoughtfully. "Maybe you're right," he said, and opened the passenger's door for Tommy. "I'll keep an eye on the police investigation."

Tommy slowly lowered himself into the seat, struggling not to let on how painful the movement was. He could taste blood in his mouth from biting down on his cheeks so hard.

Wilbur narrowed his eyes at him. "You good?"

Tommy took a moment to breathe through his nose, and when the throbbing finally dulled, shot Wilbur a wide smile. "All good here, big man."

Wilbur seemed to let it slide, and phased through the driver's door. Tommy swallowed hard, still sinking slowly back against his seat. Keeping this injury hidden all day was not going to be fun. For once, he wished he could have listened to Ranboo and stayed home.

To be fair, he survived discovery longer than he thought he would.

Wilbur and Techno had still been filing their mission reports that morning. Both had offered to let Tommy help them, though he'd opted instead to help Phil with whatever he was doing. The mere thought of reliving the events of last night, even in just words or writing, had slammed him with a surprising amount of anxiety that he wasn't prepared to deal with.

Phil's project for the day turned out to be working on the vigilante program, which was a much easier topic of conversation, even if the work was a bit more complicated. Phil was in great spirits, too; apparently, they'd already been approached by a vigilante from the sixth district, and Eret had agreed to take him on.

"So accommodation-wise, there's definitely room at the tower," Phil was saying; it was after dinner, and Wilbur and Techno had long wrapped up their reports and joined the man in working on the program. "I already have permission to convert floor seventy-two into a sort of apartment floor. They'll be small enough rooms, though they'll have all the necessary facilities, and a shared training room."

"I can start looking into construction companies," Wilbur offered.

Phil grinned at him, happy with the hero's interest in the project. "Sure, I'll send you the ones I've already looked at," he replied, and turned to Tommy and Techno. "Foolish is helping organise a training schedule, and ideally we'll get a mentoring program going. Like how Eret has taken on Purpled, any hero who's willing to can take a vigilante under their wing."

"How many are there?" Techno asked. "Will we have to double up?"

"I'm not sure," Phil replied, rubbing his chin. "Once Puffy and the Dream Team return, we'll have more heroes available to mentor. For now, we'll just have to see how it goes."

"Maybe some vigilantes could team up as well," Tommy suggested. "Like if there's a few older ones, they could take younger ones under their wing. A buddy system of sorts."

Phil's eyebrows raised. "That's good," he remarked, a smile growing. "Yeah, that could work, mate. The next big thing is their pay, I suppose—"

"Pay?" Tommy echoed, surprised.

"Well, yeah," Phil responded, amused by the boy's befuddlement. "If they're going to be protecting the city and putting themselves at risk, they should receive a pay, just as the heroes do. It's only fair."

Tommy could have hugged the man. "I didn't know you thought so highly of vigilantes," he murmured, cracking a smile. They would never fully understand how much he appreciated

them doing this, even if he had no intentions to partake in the program. He couldn't put his identity at risk like that.

"They deserve more recognition than they get," Phil said with a bright smile, walking over behind Tommy. "Even Wilbur admitted it after meeting Theseus last night—"

Tommy should have seen it coming, should have moved out of the way, should have *been more careful*; but he was far too late. With all good intentions, Phil clapped his hands over Tommy's shoulders in a friendly manner — and the agony that shot through his back was unbearable.

Tommy couldn't have stifled the cry of pain that ripped itself from his throat if he tried. His vision flashed white as he stumbled forward, catching himself on the table; his nerves were lit on fire.

As his surroundings slowly came back into his field of awareness, he was met with resounding silence and a nauseating sense of dread in his stomach. Reluctantly, he met the gazes of the three heroes; and immediately had to look away again at the deep concern he found in them.

"Tommy," Phil breathed, his horror sounding even through his voice. "Primes, I'm so sorry — are you alright, mate?"

Tommy was still trembling from the aftershocks of the pain. His head was reeling; what was he supposed to say?

"Fucking hell, Tommy," Wilbur said, and Tommy felt a hand gently brush his arm. "Is it your shoulders? What happened?"

"I—" Tommy glanced up between the heroes, panic knotting his insides and dizzying his sense of balance. That could have been the lingering pain, too.

"Can I see?" Phil asked quietly.

Tommy's heart skipped a beat. "It's just bruises, there's nothing much to see."

Phil's face creased in concern. "Are you sure it's just bruises?"

Tommy winced. His knuckles were white as he gripped the table in front of him, still weak at the knees. He hoped the heroes hadn't noticed how much he was leaning on it.

"You can tell us anything, Tommy, you know that, right?" Techno said softly. "You can trust us."

I can't, though, not with this, you don't have a clue, Tommy thought desperately.

"It's really nothing, I just fell," he said weakly, but his chin was wobbling and his limbs were trembling and he knew the excuse sounded pathetic. "Down the stairs—"

"Again?" Wilbur cut in, skeptical despite his worried expression.

Tommy glanced away, throat tight. "Yeah," he whispered.

"Tommy, I really need to check," Phil insisted softly. "If you're hurt in the workplace...."

"I'm not, I'm fine—"

"Then just let me see," Phil murmured, and a kind hand ran through Tommy's hair.

That was what did it. Tommy took a shuddering inhale, and the tears broke against his will.

The heroes were silent for a horribly long moment, but then he was gently pulled into a warm embrace. Several pairs of arms wrapped around him, and Tommy melted into it, tired and teary and aching inside and out.

"I'm sorry," he whispered, hating how his voice cracked. *For lying. For still lying. For not trusting you.*

"Don't apologise, Tommy, you have no reason to," Phil murmured, and the hand in his hair gently scratched a comforting circle.

Tommy pulled back, wiping at his eyes. His ears were burning with embarrassment from the whole situation, and the underlying panic had yet to relent.

"Tommy," Wilbur said then, quietly, reluctantly. "I hate to bring this up — but you mentioned you fought with your roommate yesterday, and...." He faltered, something akin to guilt wilting his expression.

Phil picked it up from there, gently placing his hands on Tommy's upper arms and ensuring the boy met his gaze. Tommy swallowed hard, a heavy guilt tightening in his chest at the worry the heroes had for him.

"Tommy, mate," the winged man began hesitantly, eyebrows knitting together. "I don't mean to intrude at all, but I just.... Nobody's — nobody's *hurting* you at home, are they...?"

Tommy faltered, drawing a blank as he stared at the man. *What the fuck?*

"I know it can be hard to tell someone about it, but I promise, we all care for you so much," Phil continued, forehead creasing in concern. "We just want to make sure you're safe—"

"Wait," Tommy cut him off, completely baffled. "You — you think — *what?*"

The heroes exchanged worried glances. He squinted at them, still struggling to comprehend how they'd come to such a conclusion. They really thought — *Ranboo*? He nearly laughed aloud.

"I'm not — Primes, what the hell — nobody's hurting me," Tommy said, shaking his head. The movement was dizzying, and he leaned back against the table again.

Wilbur narrowed his eyes, skeptical. "Are you sure?"

"Yeah, big man," Tommy replied, and wiped at his eyes again. "Primes—"

"But all your injuries," Phil mused, still worried but now just as confused. "Mate, you know you can trust us—"

The panic was making a reappearance in Tommy's gut. "I know," he lied quickly. Fuck, what was the term again? "I swear, I'm just... injury prone."

The heroes exchanged a glance Tommy was uncomfortable with. He grit his teeth. They didn't believe him.

Phil turned back to him with a sad smile. "Can I at least check it, then?"

Tommy's heart dropped. Was saying no even an option? Phil was as stubborn as the rest of his team when he wanted to be, and whether from a place of genuine care or avoiding a lawsuit over health insurance or whatever, he was insistent about seeing the injury. The injury that was worse than just bruises, as he'd claimed. The injury that could probably be classed as multiple injuries.

"I think he'll be alright," Techno spoke up, and the others glanced to him in surprise. He had been quiet for some time.

"Tech?" Phil asked, puzzled.

Techno kept his eyes on Tommy, and shot the boy a reassuring smile. "You patched it up okay?"

"Yeah, my roommate did," Tommy replied, wary of the way Wilbur and Phil tensed at the answer. "And I'm taking stuff for it, so... all good."

"You didn't sound all good," Wilbur argued.

Tommy frowned. "I — well, obviously it's gonna hurt, if someone hits off it."

"I am sorry for that," Phil murmured apologetically. "I had no idea."

"S'alright," Tommy replied with a shrug. The movement burned with instant regret. "Like you said, you didn't know."

"I think a break for the rest of the day is in order," Phil continued, clasping his hands together. "I don't want you to push yourself."

"I'm fine!" Tommy insisted, and went to step forward only for a knee to buckle. He caught himself on the table, wincing as pain shot through his back at the jolt.

"Yeah, sure you are," Wilbur agreed sarcastically, though there remained a worried undertone to his voice. All of a sudden, his eyes lit up with a bright idea, and he glanced between Phil and Tommy. "Hey, why don't you spend the night?"

Tommy blinked. "What?"

"It's SBI movie night," Wilbur said, smile growing. "Movie Mondays. You should join us!"

"Yeah," Phil agreed happily, grinning at Tommy. "I think it's a great idea. That way we can at least keep an eye on you."

"I — I didn't even bring a change of clothes, or anything," Tommy pointed out. "And I'd need to tell my roommate—"

"We'll find something for you to wear, no worries," Wilbur insisted cheerily. "And if he doesn't let you stay, I'll visit him myself and change his mind—"

" *Wil* ," Phil chided.

Tommy bit his cheek thoughtfully, glancing between the heroes. Techno smiled softly at him.

"Alright," he agreed at last, because he couldn't deny the small, childish part of him that was bubbly with excitement at the thought of a sleepover at the Watchtower. "Yeah, okay. Lemme just text him."

Ranboo's reluctant approval (and disappointment at the fact that Tommy had, against his wishes, gone to work) and a few hours later saw the group sprawled across two couches in front of their huge flatscreen TV. Phil and Techno were seated on one couch, while Wilbur was slouched on the other, Tommy leaning against him. He had taken more pain meds on Phil's instruction, which had done wonders for dulling the ache in his back, but left him unbelievably sleepy given it was barely even ten o'clock at night.

"My name is Inigo Montoya," he recited groggily, as said character in the movie repeated the phrase several times over. "You killed my father, prepare to die."

"Wait, wait, shh, I love this bit," Wilbur enthused.

"Offer me everything I ask for," Inigo was saying on the TV.

"Anything you want," the six-fingered man pleaded.

Inigo stabbed his sword through the man's torso. *"I want my father back, you son of a bitch."*

Tommy squirmed in his spot on the couch, cheering tiredly. "He got him!"

"A better swordsman than Wilbur," Techno teased.

"He is *not*— "

"Westley is," Tommy pointed out, and yawned. "He could beat Wilbur."

"He could *not*! " Wilbur argued. "I'm a trained hero."

"He's a trained... Dread Pirate Roberts."

"He literally *died* ."

"He was only mostly dead," Tommy corrected him cheekily.

"Hush, all of you, it's nearly over," Phil said with a smile.

Tommy could barely focus on the movie as Westley and Buttercup tricked Prince Humperdinck into defeat. His head was a blissfully blurry haze of vague awareness under the influence of whatever Phil had given him. He fell into a fit of hysterical giggling as he registered the phrase "*warthog-faced buffoon*" being uttered by one of the characters, and an arm wrapped carefully around his shoulders. He leaned into the contact with a broad smile.

The protagonists finally regrouped to escape the castle as Fezzik brought them four white horses. Tommy was teary-eyed with a sudden burst of happiness as he watched them ride off to the horizon, all free from the antagonists with newfound friendships.

"Are you crying?" Wilbur laughed, nudging him gently.

"M not," Tommy argued, burying his face into the man's shoulder. "They're like a family...."

He heard Techno and Phil chuckling at him, and his ears burned in mortification. He tucked himself even further into Wilbur's side, struggling to keep himself awake. How unfair of them to drug him and make fun of him while his guard was down.

"Do you want to go to bed, Tommy?" Phil asked kindly. The credits were rolling.

Tommy shook his head. "Not tired," he mumbled, and his body betrayed him with a yawn. "M a big man, Mr. Philza."

Wilbur snorted a laugh, and Tommy pouted.

"Shut up, Wilby," he muttered, oblivious to how his words slurred.

Wilbur went quiet, and there were several noises of delight from the other couch.

"Not a word," the man growled.

"Wasn't gonna say anything, *Wilby* ," Techno replied smugly.

"Shut the fuck up—"

"Tommy," Phil called, interrupting the pair, and Tommy raised his head again, bleary-eyed. "Are you *sure* you don't want to sleep?"

"No," Tommy insisted, and weakly pushed himself into a sitting position. "Or... yeah, I'm sure. No sleep."

"Why don't I grab my guitar then?" Wilbur suggested. "I can finally show you some of my songs."

Tommy smiled sleepily. He'd been wondering when he would get the chance to hear Wilbur's music. "Sure."

He stifled a disappointed whine as Wilbur got up, though the hero was quick to return, instrument in hand. Tommy happily settled against him once again, no regard for how awkward that made playing the guitar. Wilbur didn't seem to mind.

"This is one of my newer ones," Wilbur explained, as he tuned the strings.

He then began to play a slow, bittersweet tune, and Tommy let his eyes flutter closed. Wilbur's singing voice was soft and comforting, with a delicate warmth not often heard in his speaking tone.

"It's been sixty weeks since I saw Vienna, a bandage and a wide smile slapped across my face...."

Tommy let his head fall against the man's shoulder, comfortable against him in the rather oversized pajamas they'd let him borrow. All the stress and tension of the past two days drained from him as Wilbur strummed his guitar and sang along to its tune, and he was safe. Cared for. Trusted.

He smiled into the familiar scent of coffee, and let himself drift.

Wilbur finished the song with a slow strum, and loosened his grip on the guitar, sitting back into the couch.

"What d'you think?" he asked Tommy.

There was no reply. He glanced down to where the blond was resting against his shoulder; his eyes were closed, and chest rising and falling with steady, deep breaths. He was fast asleep.

"I don't think he lasted until the chorus," Phil noted with a tone of amusement. He and Techno stood from their couch. "Here, we can move him to the guest room—"

"No," Wilbur argued immediately, and his cheeks warmed in embarrassment. "I — it's okay. I don't want to move him and wake him up, or hurt him."

Techno chuckled. "You're so soft, *Wilby*— "

"Shut the fuck up," Wilbur hissed, face burning.

If hearing Tommy's sleepy nickname for him had made his heart swell with affection, he would deny it until his last breath. Primes, the kid really had wormed his way into their family dynamic, huh? He never would have expected it; and after boldly opposing an assistant for so long, it had truly caught him off guard.

"If you don't want to move him, you'll have to stay here," Phil pointed out, raising an eyebrow.

Wilbur set his guitar on the floor. "I know."

"You're comfortable with that?" Phil pressed, and Wilbur knew what he really meant.

He nodded. "I told him... most of it, at least." He glanced down at the sleeping boy, and couldn't hide his smile. He ran a hand through Tommy's hair, and delighted in how the blond leaned into the touch even in his sleep. "I trust him."

"If you're sure," Phil murmured with a smile.

Techno snorted. "Softie."

"Oh, says you," Wilbur argued, rolling his eyes playfully. "You're just jealous he sat on my couch and not yours."

"Whatever helps you sleep at night, Wilby."

Wilbur opened his mouth to make a witty retort, but then Tommy was moving in his sleep, and he decided against it. He carefully shifted himself into a position that was a little more comfortable for them both, and Tommy stilled with an appreciative sigh.

Phil had gone and fetched a blanket from somewhere, and draped it over the pair. Wilbur couldn't find it in himself to be embarrassed at the gesture, eyes focused on Tommy. The boy was so peaceful when he slept, a stark contrast to his usual loud and boisterous personality.

His heart panged. He really hoped Tommy was telling the truth about his home situation; he couldn't stand seeing the kid injured so often. The thought of anyone laying a hand on him....

"I'm gonna head off," Phil said, nodding in the direction of their bedrooms. "Tech?"

"No harm in an early night, I s'pose," the hybrid agreed with a shrug.

"Goodnight, then," Phil said with a soft smile.

"Night, Wil," Techno added, and the two made their way to their rooms.

"Goodnight," Wilbur called after them, and lay his head back as he heard their doors shut. It was going to be an... interesting night with Tommy at the tower, that was for sure. He smiled down at the boy. "Night, Toms."

Chapter End Notes

dudes the support on this fic is just,, blowing my mind you guys are all insane thank you so much!!! — that said, it is a struggle to reply to all the comments anymore akdhakhd just know that i read every single one of them and i treasure your kind words more than anything <333

and for those curious, the movie sbi watched was the princess bride!!! my all-time fav, it's an absolute classic >:)

Blue Promises

Chapter Summary

Tommy begins to put the puzzle pieces together as he meets a new face.

TW// descriptions of injury, nightmare

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for [notes](#)

Tommy's sleep that night was no less fitful than the night previous. His dreams were plagued with blurry visions of fire and smoke; he was in the cinema again, except it looked rather like the orphanage he'd been raised in, and rather than facing Bad, a red-eyed Phil stood opposite him. Ranboo was caught in his grip, screaming for help.

Cold panic had wrapped around Tommy's throat and squeezed tight; he tried to call for his friend, but had no voice to do so. Then blood was pouring over the three of them, thick and heavy and warm, and Phil was laughing and the ceiling was collapsing but he hadn't even saved anyone and he was stuck and he couldn't breathe and it hurt so *bad*—

"Tommy! Tommy, breathe!"

Tommy woke with a shuddering gasp. He grit his teeth as his back seized up in pain; that seemed to be one part of the nightmare that wasn't entirely in his head.

Cool hands were clutching his own, and he grasped them in return, the sensation grounding against the hot agony in his shoulders.

"Hurts," he croaked. He was still struggling to blink away the sleep in his eyes.

"I thought it might," was the soft reply. "I brought these."

Tommy took the pills wordlessly as they were pushed into his hands, and swallowed them dry. They wouldn't kick in for a while, but at least they meant he might fall asleep again eventually.

"You're alright now," said the voice, and Tommy finally realised why it sounded familiar. It was *Wilbur*, if a little more high-pitched and... echoey.

He took in his surroundings wearily, eyes finally adjusted enough to do so. He'd nearly forgotten he was at the Watchtower, having gone so long without sleeping away from home, but recognised the living area of SBI's floor instantly. *Oh* — he was still on the couch. He didn't remember falling asleep. Wilbur was crouched in front of him, smile light and happy.

Tommy did a double take. Wilbur's hair and skin were grey... and he was *transparent* .

"What the fuck—"

"Shh, shh," not-Wilbur hushed him quickly, eyes wide. His body seemed to become *more* transparent; Tommy could see the coffee table straight through him. "You're going to wake him."

"Wake who?" Tommy asked, raising an eyebrow, and nearly jumped out of his skin when he realised he was still lying half on top of Wilbur. *Actual* Wilbur — which meant there were two of them in the room. "What the fuck what the fuck—"

"Shh!" not-Wilbur insisted urgently, and then vanished completely.

Tommy froze, staring at the place of his absence. Beneath him, Wilbur gave a soft sigh, and Tommy gently peeled himself off of the man to give him space to breathe. Someone had put a blanket over the two of them; his cheeks warmed at the thought.

"Close one," the voice giggled, and not-Wilbur appeared once again out of thin air.

Tommy flinched, heart skipping a beat. "Primes, man, quit scaring me like that."

"Sorry," the figure said with a sheepish grin. "I can't help it."

"Who the fuck are you, and why do you look like Wilbur?"

"I'm Ghostbur!" not-Wilbur replied cheerfully.

Tommy lowered him an unimpressed gaze. He didn't seem to be a threat — unless the pills he'd given him were like, poisonous, in which case it was too late anyway — so he wasn't *too* concerned about his presence in the room. But he seemed to take Tommy for a fool, which he was not.

"No you're not," he stated, and nodded at actual Wilbur. " *That's* Ghostbur. Even if he doesn't like the name...."

Ghostbur's smile only widened. "That's just his title, though," he said, a light note of amusement in his voice. "I'm named after him. Wilbur is his name, and Ghostbur is mine."

"I don't follow," Tommy replied. He was too tired and sore for this. "Like — *who* are you? Why do you look like him? What the *fuck* is going on—?"

"Calm, calm," Ghostbur giggled, and faded for a moment before becoming near-opaque once again. "You're very loud, Tommy."

Tommy squinted at him. "Why do you keep disappearing? How do you *know* me?"

"Give me a minute and I'll answer you," Ghostbur said, and gave a light laugh. "If you wake up Wilbur, he'll have to explain everything, and he's a lot grumpier than me~"

"Hey, Wil's not that bad," Tommy said defensively. He twisted to glance at the man in question, and froze as his back suffered another sharp stabbing pain, pulling a weak gasp from his throat.

"Are you okay?" Ghostbur asked, smile dropping.

"Yeah, yeah," Tommy mumbled, waiting out the pain. "Just... talk."

Ghostbur eyed him warily for a moment, and then nodded. The smile returned to his features as easily as ever. He was an enigma, that was for sure; he shared Wilbur's face but wore it so differently.

"Okay," he agreed pleasantly. "Well, as I said, my name's Ghostbur. Wilbur and I are the same person, but also... not. He's him and I'm me, so we're different, but I only exist because of him."

Tommy blinked. "You make... no fucking sense."

"*Shhh*," Ghostbur whispered, giggling. "Wilbur told you about the curse, didn't he? I think I remember that."

"Yeah—"

"Good!" Ghostbur cheered, clasping his hands together. "I *am* the curse, if that makes it easier to understand."

The longer the conversation went on, the more Tommy was convinced he hadn't woken up at all. This had to be some sort of fever dream. He pinched his arm carefully, as though the

burning agony his back had suffered hadn't been enough of a reassurance that he was awake.

"Not really," he responded at last. "Wilbur said he can't sleep or — or, y'know...."

"Die?" Ghostbur finished, all too happily, and Tommy winced. "Nope! He can't. Well, he can, because he's sleeping right now, but he's also aware of this happening right now. Aware of *me*."

"What the fuck."

"He's not in control, per se, and he won't remember the specifics," Ghostbur explained, "it'll be rather like a dream when he wakes up. It's the same for me when he's awake. I have his memories, but they tend to be fuzzy."

"So you... so you're the curse," Tommy murmured thoughtfully. "He never rests. Because of you."

"Your phrasing is a little harsh," Ghostbur replied awkwardly. "It's not my fault. I just exist."

"Yeah, sorry," Tommy said, wincing. "I didn't mean it like that."

Quick as a whip, Ghostbur was smiling cheerfully again. "It's okay, Tommy. You're one of my favourite people, so I forgive you."

Tommy's head was reeling. "...Right. *Primes*, this is the weirdest shit ever." He struggled to gather his thoughts. "So... you two can't — be awake? Is that right? At the same time?"

"Nope!" Ghostbur replied. "That's why I keep disappearing. If you wake Wilbur up, I can't stay."

"Why... why did XD curse him with... this?" Tommy asked, frowning. "It doesn't seem too bad, for a curse."

"Well, it kind of is," Ghostbur admitted reluctantly. "Like you said, Wilbur can't rest. He's always awake, just in the back of my head. And when he dies, he'll never pass on, because I'll be stuck here forever." He smiled pleasantly, as if he hadn't just delivered devastating news. "But at least if you outlive him, a part of him will stay with you until *you* die! That part being me!"

Tommy couldn't bring himself to find joy at the thought. He didn't really want to consider Wilbur's death at three in the morning with his... ghost?

"Oh. Nice."

"I agree," Ghostbur said happily. "Plus, Wilbur gets to spend way more time with you this way! And he loves spending time with you."

Tommy glanced sideways at the sleeping hero on the couch, and his ears warmed. He'd known that Wilbur didn't mind having him around the tower any more, but hearing Ghostbur put it so bluntly was... surprising. And heartwarming. And a little embarrassing.

You did fall asleep on his shoulder; his brain helpfully reminded him. And he didn't move you. He stayed right here.

"And I love spending time with you too!" Ghostbur declared happily. "Though last time I did, you were asleep. So it's nice to meet you at last!"

Tommy blinked. "I beg your pardon?"

Ghostbur grinned. "I can go wherever I want! I'm not stuck like Wilbur. And it gets boring in the tower when everyone is asleep, so I like to wander around and visit people."

"First of all, that is a horrible invasion of privacy," Tommy pointed out, trying to ignore the nauseating thought that Ghostbur might have seen or know things that Tommy was trying desperately to hide. "Visiting people in the middle of the night—"

"I'm very nice about it!" Ghostbur insisted. "I usually only visit people who know about me. But your room was *right beside* Phil's in that hotel, so I really couldn't help myself—"

"Primes, that was *you?!* " Tommy exclaimed, so loudly Ghostbur vanished for a moment as Wilbur stirred. He faded slowly back into existence only a few seconds later. "Sorry — that was you, though?"

Ghostbur seemed delighted. "Do you remember? Oh, I thought you were asleep!"

"Half asleep," Tommy corrected him dryly. "I knew I wasn't imagining things when I saw someone in the room."

"Nope," Ghostbur giggled. "That was me! You had a bruise on your neck, remember?"

The sinking sensation in Tommy's stomach made a swift return. He frowned at the ghost. "So... Wil knows about that, then?"

"Oh yes, he was very worried," Ghostbur replied. "He was very worried about this injury too, and you were talking in your sleep and you sounded like you were in pain, so that's why I got you the pain stuff Phil has."

He raised the bottle in his hand, shaking it lightly with a smile. Tommy frowned; he didn't want to worry the heroes, he really didn't, but it was apparently inevitable when they seemed to care so much.

"So what happened?" Ghostbur asked, and his tone was so innocent and cheerful that Tommy only just caught himself from slipping up in time.

"I — er, fell down the stairs," he said instead, averting his gaze.

"Oh, that's unfortunate," Ghostbur remarked. "Pity you can't just phase through them."

"Yeah," Tommy agreed quietly. Phasing through the rubble would have definitely been easier, and a lot less traumatic.

"Did you have a nightmare about it?"

Tommy blinked, thrown off by how forward Ghostbur was with everything. He swallowed hard, folding his arms. "No."

"Oh, well, I think you did," Ghostbur pointed out nonchalantly. "You seemed quite distressed. It made me worried."

Tommy bit his cheek. "Sorry."

Ghostbur grabbed his hand again, the sensation cold but oddly comforting. "Don't be sorry, Tommy! I would worry the same for any of my favourite people."

Tommy's cheeks warmed. "You keep saying that... that I'm one of your favourite people. But you've only just met me."

"That's not entirely true," Ghostbur said, grinning. "I've gotten to know you through Wilbur. He's very fond of you, y'know, and I can see why."

"Oh," Tommy said softly. His heart was doing odd things in his chest as the ghost gave his hand a squeeze.

"He sees you like a little brother, I think."

"A brother?" Tommy squeaked, eyes widening.

Ghostbur giggled. "Well, he wouldn't let just anyone fall asleep on him, and trust them enough to let me meet them."

Trust, Tommy thought, and yawned as a slow wave of renewed exhaustion crashed over him. The drugs seemed to be kicking in; he hadn't noticed the pain in his shoulders for some time now. *He trusts me?*

"Sleepy, Tommy?" Ghostbur asked, the corners of his eyes creasing as he smiled wide. "That's okay. I don't mind if you want to go back to sleep."

"M not," Tommy denied, shaking his head. "I don't want to leave you alone."

"It's okay, I'm used to it," Ghostbur said. "I'll find someone else to visit."

An idea began to put itself together in Tommy's head, and he struggled to blink away his tiredness, glancing at the ghost.

"Ghostbur... you said you can go anywhere?"

"Yup!" he replied, popping the 'p'.

Tommy frowned as he considered the idea a little more; it probably wouldn't work in his favour, not unless....

"Can you hide things? From Wilbur?"

Ghostbur blinked, surprised. "Well, yes! It's a bit difficult to block him out, but I can," he replied, and frowned. "I don't understand why you ask, though."

Tommy stifled a nervous yawn. "Um... well, I was wondering if you could check on my roommate, but... um. I don't want Wilbur to see my apartment."

Ghostbur tilted his head to the side curiously. "Why not? I'm sure he would think it's lovely ___"

"No, no," Tommy insisted, shaking his head. "You don't get it. It's more, er.... If you're gonna be visiting, I just need you to promise that every time you do, you don't let him see anything in there."

Ghostbur blinked. "Why?"

Because I'm an illegal vigilante, and if he finds out it'll break him, and I can't take that, Tommy thought, wincing at the sharp pang in his chest. "Just... promise me you won't let him see anything. No matter what you find."

"I..." Ghostbur trailed off, looking uncomfortable. "I don't know if I can.... He doesn't like it when I hide things from him. Gives him bad headaches."

"It's for a surprise party," Tommy lied, innerly cursing himself. Why was the solution always more lies? "I just don't want him to see anything before then."

"Oh!" Ghostbur exclaimed, cheering up immediately. "That sounds wonderful, Tommy."

"So you promise?" Tommy pressed.

"Yes, I promise," Ghostbur agreed happily. "A surprise party! That will be fun."

Tommy sighed wearily, slouching further against the back of the couch. "Yeah."

Ghostbur smiled fondly at him. "Sleepy Tommy," he teased, poking the boy in the cheek. "You're like a little cat."

"M a big man," Tommy argued, to no avail. He glanced back at Wilbur, sleeping soundly against the armrest, and at the open space next to him.

"He won't mind," Ghostbur said, as if reading Tommy's mind. He shot the boy an affectionate smile. " *Promise* ."

Reluctantly and a little awkwardly, Tommy slotted himself into the space next to Wilbur. The man mumbled something incoherent, and an arm snaked around Tommy's chest, pulling him closer. Tommy's face warmed. *Clingy bitch*, he thought, though didn't really mind at all. It was... nice.

Ghostbur pulled the blanket over the pair, smiling sweetly. And then, before Tommy could object, he pressed a cold kiss to the boy's forehead. It tingled even after he pulled away. Tommy's cheeks were hotter than ever.

"I'll check on your roommate," Ghostbur murmured. "Sleep well, Tommy."

Tommy found a sudden anxiety gripping him as the ghost straightened, beginning to float away. "Wait," he called, and swallowed hard. "I don't — what if I have another — um...."

"Another nightmare?" Ghostbur smiled at him. "They can be scary, but they're not real. You're safe here. You have Wilbur, and Techno and Phil. And I'll be back soon."

Not real, Tommy echoed, though couldn't quite shake the ghostly feeling of being trapped by rubble, nor the fear of being burned alive or left for dead. He met Ghostbur's faintly glowing gaze. "Promise?" he whispered.

"Promise," Ghostbur assured him. He smiled. "Goodnight, Tommy."

As it turned out, Tommy didn't have to worry about any more nightmares that night. He slept a decent few hours for the first time since the cinema incident, warm and comfortable and safe against Wilbur's side. His head was still spinning from his conversation with Ghostbur at three in the morning; when he woke again, he still wasn't entirely sure it had actually happened. Wilbur's subconscious had manifested itself as a ghost? Wilbur saw him as a brother? That in particular seemed... too good to be true, perhaps.

The hero in question was still out like a light when Tommy, for the second time, had to carefully escape his grasp and slide off of the couch. His back still ached dully, though whatever Ghostbur had given him hadn't yet worn off, given that the pain wasn't agonising. He hummed thoughtfully to himself. Maybe it really had happened.

Phil and Techno were seated at the kitchen table as he stumbled into the room. The two were still dressed in their pajamas, Phil in a dark grey robe, both pouring over something on Techno's phone and murmuring delightedly back and forth to one another. They didn't notice Tommy's entrance until he cleared his throat awkwardly. It felt rather like an intrusion, seeing his employers in such an oddly and intimately domestic manner at this hour of the morning.

"Tommy!" Phil greeted him cheerfully, and his smile turned almost *smug* as Tommy approached, which was an odd expression to see on the man. "Good morning."

"Ayup," Tommy replied, hoping the groggy rasp of his throat didn't sound as obvious as it felt.

Techno glanced up from his phone, and as he took in Tommy's appearance, his expression slowly shifted into one identical to Phil's. Tommy eyed the pair suspiciously; it was unnerving.

"What're you guys lookin' at?" he asked, narrowing his eyes.

"Nothing, nothing," Techno assured him with a shrug, though his triumphant grin had yet to fall. "You, uh, you sleep well?"

"I guess," Tommy answered carefully, glancing between the two heroes. "What's going on...?"

"I see you met Ghostbur," Phil said, eyes gleaming with mirth.

"Primes, that wasn't a dream?" Tommy asked, eyes widening a fraction. "Fuckin' hell, Wil—Wilbur's got issues."

Phil snorted in amusement. "Is he up?"

"He is now," Techno pointed out, nodding towards the doorway.

"Where's Tommy?" Wilbur asked, voice groggy as he entered the kitchen, rubbing at his head.

"Right here, big man," Tommy replied, turning to face the hero. "Only just woke up."

Wilbur met Tommy's gaze, and then froze. His eyes darted across the boy's face several times over, a shade of scarlet adorning his cheeks. "Oh."

" *Oh* ," Techno echoed teasingly, enjoying this far too much.

Tommy was left utterly confused by the whole situation. "What the hell is going on? Are you all always this weird in the morning?"

Wilbur ignored him, unable to tear his gaze away from Tommy's face. "Did I do that?" he asked, almost hesitant in his words.

"Yes, mate, who else?" Phil laughed.

"Do what?!" Tommy demanded, whirling around. They continued to ignore him.

"I'm — um — bathroom," Wilbur stammered, face red as he hurried in the direction of their bedrooms.

Phil and Techno couldn't hold back their laughter any longer, and Tommy was left baffled, standing in the middle of the kitchen with a weary expression. He went to pinch the bridge of his nose, only to falter — his hands were *blue*.

"What the fuck...?" he questioned aloud, staring at his stained fingers.

They were thoroughly coloured with a deep royal blue, and even when he rubbed them together, the stain did not fade. He glanced up at Techno and Phil suspiciously — who were both still cackling — and recalled seeing similar stains on both their faces before. Phil had said it was printer ink; yet the puzzle pieces were beginning to click. Tommy had a vague idea of what it really was. He *knew* the man had been lying.

"Phil?" he called, glancing back at his hands. "When you said, *I see you've met Ghostbur... .*"

Phil grinned at him. "Have a look for yourself, mate," he suggested, and tossed Techno's phone over.

The picture the two heroes had been pouring over earlier was still on the screen. Tommy blushed in earnest as he processed it; it was a photo someone had taken of him and Wilbur curled up asleep on the couch that morning. The blanket was pulled up to their chins, but on Tommy's face were two very obvious blue marks of an identical shade to his hands; one, a small round fingerprint on his cheek, and the other on his forehead, in the clear shape of a pair of lips.

He reached up to touch his face gently in the location of the marks, though wasn't sure why. He couldn't see them to tell if they had smudged or not, and his fingertips were blue regardless.

"That clingy ghost bastard," he hissed, though there was no real venom behind his words. "When will they go away?"

Phil laughed in good humour at him. "Couple days, usually," he replied, and Tommy huffed. "Your hands might take longer. Ghostbur's not usually so touchy."

"He is if you're awake to see him," Techno chimed in, amused. "I presume you were, Tommy?"

Tommy nodded, passing Techno's phone back to him. "Spooked me awake, he did."

"What do you think of him?" Phil asked curiously.

Tommy shrugged. "Definitely surprised me at first," he admitted, "but he seems alright. Very... I dunno how to put it—"

"Kind? Sensitive? Blunt?" Techno offered, and Tommy nodded. "Yeah. Wil's a big softie, but Ghostbur even more so."

"We tried... well, weaponising him when we were first figuring out the whole curse thing," Phil explained, wincing. "Thought he'd be useful for shadowing people, infiltrating bases, gathering information and the like. But Ghostbur's never been comfortable on the field. Especially with the whole water deal."

Tommy raised an eyebrow. "That hardly carries on through the curse, does it?"

Phil nodded. "It actually affects Ghostbur much worse than it does Wil. It melts him, so to speak. Which is horrible all on its own, but on top of it, Wilbur carries the damage into his waking hours like a burn mark."

"Shit," Tommy breathed, frowning. "And you never did catch them? The one who did it?"

"XD?" Techno chimed in. Tommy nodded, and Techno shook his head. "They've been gone for years. We stopped searching a long time ago."

Tommy curled his fists, his magic sparking beneath his skin all on its own. It wasn't fair that XD was allowed to just... get away with it all. Everything they'd done to Wilbur, all the damage and harm they'd caused, and they had just walked away with no repercussions? It was infuriating.

"Surely there's gotta be some way," he muttered, "of finding them, or... *something* . It's not *fair* —"

"It's okay," Wilbur cut in. He had returned from the bathroom and was now standing in the doorway, looking a little as though he were in physical pain but not as red as he had been earlier. He shuffled uncomfortably under the gazes of the other three. "I'm over it Tommy, really. I appreciate the concern—"

"You're not, though, not really," Tommy argued. "You still have your whole thing with vigilantes."

"That's not something that finding XD would magically fix," Wilbur said quietly. "And I don't...." He paused, considering his next words almost nervously. "I don't know if I *want* to find XD. If I never see them again... I'd be okay with that."

The room seemed to still after the confession, falling into an uneasy silence. Wilbur shifted his weight where he stood, uncomfortable, and Tommy made his way over to him, unsure of what to say or do but determined to do something — *anything* — to comfort the man.

"That's alright then," he said, uncertain and hesitant but kind. "You don't have to. But, y'know, if ever you did find them — what I did to Dream is nothing compared to what I'd do to them."

Wilbur managed a small smile, amused but appreciative. "Thanks, Tommy."

The hero's eyes flitted across Tommy's forehead for a moment, and absent-mindedly, he reached up a hand to lightly trace the blue stain. Tommy was sure his face had taken on a brilliant shade of red at the gesture, though didn't move away. Wilbur seemed to realise what he was doing and returned his hand to his side swiftly, blushing as he cleared his throat.

At the table, Phil and Techno were grinning delightedly, all too smug. Wilbur scowled at the pair, and Tommy decided it was a great time to change the subject.

"Well boys, does anyone have any clothes they'd be willing to lend me? Preferably something a bit smaller than this," he added, gesturing to the baggy pajamas he was still wearing.

Wilbur snorted. "Not our fault you're *tiny* ."

"I am *not*— !"

"Actually, I do have something in mind," Techno piped up, interrupting them. He was still grinning wide, though the offer seemed genuine enough as he pushed his chair out from the table and made his way over. "If you'll come with me, Tommy."

"Sure thing," Tommy agreed, with a shrug that pulled a little painfully on his back.

He followed Techno out of the kitchen, shooting Wilbur one last smile before he left. Ghostbur's words wouldn't be forgotten anytime soon, that much was for sure; *"brother"* was clinging to the forefront of his thoughts already. It wasn't a sentiment he'd been expecting, especially not from *Wilbur* of all people — but he couldn't find himself opposed to it. It made the lies all the more painful, but the smiles they exchanged and the lighthearted banter they had all the more meaningful. A small, childish and hopeful part of him wondered if the case was similar for Techno and Phil too — though he didn't dare indulge the thought for too long. It was probably foolish of him.

Of course, Ranboo's point still stood. None of SBI really knew him, and he couldn't afford to trust them. But that didn't kill the hope that just maybe, one day, they *would* know him — and so he could.

Chapter End Notes

the ghostbur concept is of course inspired by the fic ["one more step out of the pit"](#) by adrianainthesnow!! i absolutely adored the idea <3

this chapter feels a little short and stiff even though it's still 4.3k words akfhkaks
hopefully the next will be better :)

Mornings at the Watchtower

Chapter Summary

Tommy spends the morning in the company of the heroes as he continues to recover from his injuries.

TW// mild descriptions of injury

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for [notes](#)

As it turned out, what Techno had in mind involved leading Tommy into Phil's office. The room held a certain amount of nostalgia to it; Tommy didn't spend time in it very often anymore, so it was less a room in his place of work and more the room where he'd first met Phil for that interview and changed his whole life. He hadn't seen the pale walls nor the plush leather chair in a long time, and the sight brought a small smile to his face.

Techno skirted carefully around him into the room, making his way towards the desk, and Tommy recalled why they were in there in the first place. He followed the man with some confusion, letting the door shut quietly behind him.

"Should I ask why we're looking for clothes in Philza Minecraft's office?" he joked, though raised an eyebrow at Techno with some intrigue.

Techno snorted in amusement, rounding the desk to open a stack of boxes in the corner. "These just came in yesterday."

"What did?"

Techno pulled a grey-and-green jumper from the box, holding it up to Tommy with a broad grin. Printed on the back of the jumper was a small, cartoon-like wing design; the name *Philza Minecraft* accompanied the pattern. Tommy's eyes lit up.

"Is this *Philza merch*? " he asked, practically tripping over his feet to touch the fabric with his own hands.

"Unreleased," Techno said smugly, "though not for long. Phil's a bit embarrassed by it, but the merch is part of this whole publicity thing the Watchtower's trying to do."

"Does that mean you and Wilbur have merch?" Tommy asked, grin widening.

Techno made a noise of amusement. "We've escaped so far," he replied. "It's mainly Dream and Phil for the time being, though I think Foolish might have a plushie line."

Tommy barely stifled his laugh at that. Techno dropped the jumper into his arms, and began rooting through another box, pulling out a matching pair of sweatpants. Tommy took the clothing gratefully, probably a little too excited to be the first to model Philza merch.

"I am honoured," he said, eyes shining as he stared at the material in awe.

"Great," Techno laughed. "Phil will be mortified when he sees you wearing this, I can't wait."

"Where can I change?" Tommy asked, and then paused as Techno's smile became a little uneasy. "Techno...?"

"Here's fine, or the spare bathroom," Techno answered, a little awkwardly. He rubbed at the back of his neck. "But — er, Tommy...."

Tommy swallowed an anxious laugh. "Just say it, Big T, 'cause you're making me nervous."

Techno still didn't speak for a moment, considering his words. "I.... How's your back?"

"Fine," Tommy replied stiffly, his eyes narrowing fractionally at the hybrid. "Ghostbur gave me stuff for it, so...."

"Can I check it?" Techno asked gingerly.

Tommy frowned, heart sinking. "I.... Yesterday you said we didn't have to, I thought...."

"I know, I did," Techno agreed, wincing. "I do agree with Phil, though, that one of us needs to make sure you're alright. I just thought better me than him — you know how he gets."

"Why—" Tommy swallowed the lump in his throat. "I don't understand — why do you want to see it so bad?"

Techno let out a slow breath, and when he spoke again, it was with the most sincerity Tommy had ever heard from the man. "We care about you, Tommy," he murmured. "We really do. And I just want to know that you're okay, and I want *you* to know that you can tell us anything. *Anything*, okay? And it wouldn't change a thing between us."

Tommy lowered his gaze, trying to ignore the nauseating knot of guilt that was tying his stomach in half.

"But," Techno continued, bringing Tommy's eyes up again, "I also want you to know that I'm not gonna pressure you into saying anything. So if you let me check your back, checking your back is all I'm gonna do. No questions. I just want to make sure whatever's causing you pain is being treated properly, and if you feel like it, you can talk. If you don't, that's okay."

Tommy swallowed, a reluctant relief easing the anxiety that had pooled in his stomach. That was the most genuine reassurance he'd ever received from any of SBI, and — Primes, Techno meant it, didn't he, when he said that they all cared for him? He didn't want to worry the man by showing him the full extent of his injuries, but clearly they were worried regardless. And if there were no questions... maybe having someone more professional than Ranboo take a look at his back wasn't the worst idea.

He rubbed at his eyes, which had begun watering against his will, and gave a small nod. "Okay."

"Okay," Techno agreed, and smiled at him. "Here, come sit on Phil's stool, it'll give me better access."

Tommy did as he was told, settling himself on the stool behind Phil's desk and shaking off his nervous jitters. The perspective of the office from this seat made him feel quite important, though also rather out of place.

Techno began to slowly lift the pajama top over his head, and Tommy grit his teeth as he manoeuvred his arms out of the sleeves. The movement pulled on his stitches.

The pajama top was placed on the desk and Tommy remained silent, focusing on not letting his hands tremble. Techno, too, was quiet behind him. Then warm fingertips were carefully prodding his bruised shoulders, and Tommy flinched.

"Relax," Techno murmured, his low voice soothing. "You're very tense."

"Sorry," Tommy mumbled.

"It's okay. Just take a few deep breaths for me."

Tommy did, following Techno's own breathing pattern, and found the stress in his muscles slowly seeped from them, letting his shoulders sag. The fingertips returned, and he let his eyes flutter closed as they gently moved across his back.

"Who did your stitches?" Techno asked, and then paused. "Sorry. You don't have to answer."

"S'okay," Tommy murmured. "My roommate did."

"They're not bad," Techno admitted. "Did he treat them with anything?"

"Um. A washcloth?"

Techno hummed thoughtfully. "I'm gonna grab some stuff from the medicine cupboard real quick," he said. "Just something to prevent infection. Bandages, too."

"Yeah, we didn't have any of that," Tommy said.

Techno rounded the desk and nodded. "No problem. I can give you some to take home with you."

"You don't have to—"

"Kid, we have a surplus of supplies," Techno snorted. "I'll be right back."

Tommy nodded, eyes watching the door as it closed behind the hero. He let out a shaky sigh in his absence, and hoped desperately that he was making the right decision. Ranboo probably wouldn't approve, but surely he would at least understand — he'd left his phone in the kitchen, otherwise he would text his roommate. He had yet to hear from Ghostbur about how Ranboo had gotten on alone last night.

Tommy let his gaze wander the various objects that cluttered Phil's desk as he waited. On the left, there was a stack of papers that on closer inspection seemed to be completed mission reports from Wilbur and Techno; a full-body shiver overcame him as he realised the one on top of the stack was detailing the cinema incident, and he quickly moved on. He didn't need to relive those events anytime soon.

Among the various mugs and pens and post-it notes that littered the desk, there was one object that really caught his attention. A rectangular photo frame, two separate pictures inside. They were faded from the sun but clearly of some importance to Phil, given their place on his desk. Interest piqued, Tommy used his magic to summon the frame closer, not wanting to stretch his arms.

The first picture seemed more recent, a little more colour in it than the other and the faces more familiar. Phil was at the centre of the image, arms wrapped around two shorter figures as he grinned up at the camera. Tommy was shocked by how young Wilbur and Techno appeared; Wilbur's hair was long and fluffy on all sides, like a bush on his head, and Techno's pink locks were cut short to his shoulders. They couldn't have been any older than Tommy was now.

The second picture was much older. Phil's face held none of the signs of age that it did now, his blonde hair brighter and smile broad. Beside him, mouth half-open and eyes gently creased as though she'd been caught mid-laugh, was a woman Tommy didn't recognise. She had a kind, round face, and was looking at Phil as though the universe itself was in his eyes.

"Ah, I see you've found Phil's favourite photographs."

Tommy nearly jumped out of his skin as Techno spoke up again, closing the door behind him.

"Primes, that door is too fuckin' quiet," he muttered.

Techno smiled at him, setting down some of what he'd brought on the desk. He stood behind Tommy once again, and Tommy forced himself to relax as he listened to the hero fiddle with a cap.

"This might be cold," Techno warned him, and began gently massaging a cream over Tommy's injuries. It took a lot of effort not to tense up at the feeling; its sting was mild enough but it was certainly freezing on his bare skin.

"How long ago were these taken?" Tommy asked, gesturing to the photo frame.

"The first one... that would've been six or seven years ago, now," Techno murmured thoughtfully. "Wilbur and I had just been accepted to begin training to become heroes. That was the day we first met Phil."

"You look very ugly in it," Tommy deadpanned, grinning.

He didn't have to see Techno to sense the eyeroll that had followed his statement. "Thanks, Tommy."

"You should be glad. I'm just letting you know you've definitely improved since then. Even if not by a lot."

He received a light cuff to the back of his head, and laughed. Techno made a noise of amusement in response, and Tommy's smile widened.

"So who's in the second one, then?" he asked. "Apart from Phil, obviously."

"Oh, that's Phil's partner," Techno replied, swapping the cream for bandages as he began to wrap Tommy's shoulders. "I don't know much about her. He doesn't talk about her very often."

Tommy frowned in thought. "Yeah, I guess not. I didn't even know he had a partner."

Techno was quiet for a moment. "She's been... gone, for a long time now. I never met her."

"Oh."

Tommy carefully pushed the photo frame back to its original position with his hand, and Techno ripped off the end of the bandage, patting it down into place.

"All wrapped up," he said. "Just take these."

"More pain stuff?" Tommy questioned, examining the differently coloured pills Techno had given him.

"Mhm."

Tommy spun the stool around, raising an eyebrow at the man. "Two different kinds?"

Techno swallowed, and then sighed. "Okay, one's for the pain. The other's for your throat."

Tommy faltered. For a moment, he couldn't find his voice. "My — um, my throat?"

"You sounded very raspy this morning," Techno explained, his words a little too rushed. "Thought there was no harm in at least offering."

"Yeah," Tommy agreed nervously. "My throat, um, gets like that in the mornings."

Techno clapped his hands together, not quite looking him in the eye. "Well, that's it then. Um, I'll let you get dressed. Wilbur's preening Phil's wings in the living area, if you'd like to join."

"Right," Tommy said, and gave an awkward nod to the hero as he left again. *He... he hardly knows, right? How would he?*

He considered the thought as he dressed himself, head spinning and anxiety pooling in his gut. Sure, he'd slipped up a couple times, but nothing that he thought gave away his connection to Theseus... right? It didn't make sense that Techno would know. No, no, he couldn't know. His airways constricted at the thought, and he swallowed down the pills in his palm.

It was fine. Everything was fine.

Donning the Philza merch, Tommy took a second to compose himself before opening the door and heading back towards the living area. He had no idea what *preening* entailed, but he would gladly take any distraction from his head.

The coffee table had been pushed to the side, and Phil was sitting cross-legged on the rug, one wing stretched out to its full length. The limbs were impressive as they were, but seeing them in their full glory left Tommy a little in awe. He was glad Phil was seated on the floor, as he was sure that were he standing with both wings outstretched, he would have made quite an imposing figure. There was a reason people called him the Angel of Death, after all.

Wilbur's head peered out over the top of the outstretched wing, and he grinned wide as he took in Tommy's outfit. Phil didn't take much longer to notice the boy's presence, and his face flushed red as he did.

"Oh for fuck's sake, Tech," he laughed, amusement evident in his tone but not as prominent as embarrassment. "The merch? Really?"

"Fits him better than any of our clothes," Techno replied smugly from the kitchen.

"Aw Tommy, you look like a miniature Phil in those colours," Wilbur cooed. "Even the hair and the eyes — all you need is wings, and you'd be the spitting image of each other."

Tommy glanced down at the greys and greens of the jumper. He had to admit, Wilbur probably did have a point; he and Phil did look rather alike even before he'd donned the merch. It wasn't a fact he found himself opposed to.

"Do I get to keep it?" Tommy asked cheerfully, not joking in the slightest.

"We can even get Phil to sign it for you," Wilbur suggested with a grin.

"Primes, really?!"

Phil shook his head in amusement. "I mean... sure, mate."

"Amazing. Philza Minecraft, I adore you."

Techno snorted, and Wilbur beckoned Tommy over eagerly.

"Here, c'mere Tommy, I'll show you how to preen his wings," the hero offered, and Tommy hurried over, kneeling down beside him. "Then Philza Minecraft will adore you too."

"I already—" Phil began, but cut himself off with a laugh. If warmth bubbled in Tommy's chest, he wouldn't dare admit it.

"It's pretty easy, you just have to be gentle," Wilbur instructed, using his own hands as a guide. "Use your fingers to comb through the feathers, and pull out any loose ones. You can use your nails to dislodge any dirt."

"Does it hurt?" Tommy asked, wincing as Wilbur plucked out a couple smaller feathers, discarding them in a small pile on the floor.

"Nah mate," Phil replied, rolling his shoulders back. "Nothing I can't handle."

"So it does," Tommy inferred.

Phil laughed. "Alright, yeah, a bit. But it's like a massage, kind of — it hurts but it feels good afterwards."

Tommy had never had a massage. He was startled from this thought as Wilbur took gentle hold of his wrist, pulling it towards Phil's wing; the dark feathers were sleek and cool under his fingertips, like a tangible midnight. He ran his fingers between the feathers curiously.

"A little more forceful, but you get the idea," Wilbur said. "Like this, look, here's a loose one."

He guided Tommy's hand towards a feather that was laying a little out of place; sure enough, it shifted easier beneath his hands than the others, and with a light tug, it fell out. Tommy held the feather between his fingers for a moment, twirling it under the light.

"Pretty, aren't they," Wilbur said with a smile.

Tommy had to agree. "I'd love to have wings."

"They're a bit more work than they look," Phil chimed in with a laugh. "Prime knows how many doorways I get caught in, or things I've knocked over."

"Yeah, but *wings*," Tommy argued, letting the feather fall from his fingers and glide to the floor. He pondered vaguely if he could fly with his magic; he'd considered it before, but hadn't yet dared try. Maybe if he pushed his boosts a little further....

"Keep going," Wilbur encouraged him. "Phil, give me your other wing."

Tommy continued threading his fingers through the feathers as Phil stretched out his wings to their full span. The movement was rhythmic and soothing, even for him; he let a small smile grace his lips as he worked methodically through each section of feathers. Phil, too, seemed quite relaxed as the pair preened his wings; Tommy could just about make out that his eyes had shut, peering over his wing.

"How did you sleep last night, Tommy?" Wilbur asked conversationally, a few minutes into the silence.

Tommy glanced sideways at the man. "Don't you remember? You were... there, after all."

Wilbur shrugged, fingers moving deftly. "I guess," he said. "It's a bit... cloudy, though. You had a bad dream?"

Tommy faltered. *Really, Wilbur? In front of everyone?* "No," he replied evenly. "I'm a big man. I dream only of women, and... primes."

Wilbur chuckled lightly. "Of course, Tommy."

Tommy swallowed, picking a fleck of dirt from Phil's feathers and pretending he didn't feel said hero and Techno staring at him.

"If you wanna talk about it..." Wilbur pressed, eyeing him carefully.

"Nope," Tommy repeated brightly, hoping his light tone covered up how his muscles had tensed at the suggestion. "And I did actually sleep well, after talking to Ghostbur."

"I'm glad," Wilbur murmured, gaze lingering on his forehead before he turned back to Phil's wings. "Ghostbur.... Well, he doesn't represent anything good to me. So I'm happy he could help you, even if just a bit."

"He said you were the same person, but also different," Tommy mentioned. "Which he didn't exactly clarify."

Wilbur rolled his eyes. "Typical of him."

"Ghostbur is like... a part of Wilbur, we've figured," Phil spoke up, shifting his wings. "He seems to be a manifestation of his subconscious, or at least some part of it."

"He's like if you took Wilbur and *didn't* put everything he says through the hundred or so filters of his conscious mind," Techno remarked in amusement from across the room. "Which is why he comes across as so blunt and forward."

Tommy pretended as though he hadn't become hyper aware of the blue kiss on his forehead and what it implied given this revelation. So Ghostbur had been the one to show such affection, but that meant Wilbur really did view him in such a fond manner; he wasn't sure why he was surprised, but heat rose to his cheeks all the same.

"Yes, thank you both so kindly," Wilbur said sarcastically. "I love it when you psychoanalyse me at this hour of the morning."

"He didn't really feel like *Wilbur* , though," Tommy pointed out.

"That's the other thing," Phil explained. "Ghostbur doesn't seem to hold any negative feelings or emotions. Which, if you take those away from anyone, will change their personality pretty drastically."

"Yeah, he left all that stuff with me," Wilbur grumbled.

"Does he... *take* emotions from you?" Tommy asked, baffled.

Wilbur shrugged. "I dunno, but my life certainly felt a lot more optimistic before the fucking curse."

Tommy frowned. "Sorry, Wil."

"It's just how it is, now," Wilbur said, waving off his apology. "I'm done moping about it."

Techno caught Tommy's eye from the kitchen, shaking his head with an expression that said otherwise. When he opened his mouth, Tommy thought perhaps it was to verbally disagree with Wilbur, but instead—

"Breakfast's ready," he called, and set down two plates on the table.

Tommy glanced at Phil questioningly. "Are we finished preening?"

Phil shrugged, fluffing out his wings as he pushed himself to his feet. "We preen them every morning, and any spots you missed now I'll cover again later. Thanks for helping."

"Course, big man," Tommy said, smiling.

"Plus we've got training this morning, so Prime knows all your feathers will get ruffled again," Wilbur pointed out, helping Tommy up.

"Are you actually keeping an eye on your calendar, Wil?" Phil teased.

"Well now that Tommy helps keep it updated, it's easier to keep track of," Wilbur admitted, folding his arms in embarrassment. "Plus Fundy won't let me forget about it this time."

Tommy winced as the muscles in his back stretched, and gave himself a moment for the pain to ebb away. "Is this training with the other heroes?"

"Well, everyone who's still here," Techno said. "So no Dream Team or Puffy. But you can finally meet Foolish, Eret and Fundy."

"I can come with you guys?" Tommy asked, eyes widening.

"Of course, mate," Phil said cheerily. "Why wouldn't you?"

Tommy shrugged, seating himself as Wilbur pulled out a chair.

"Nope, wrong seat," Techno called, carrying over the other two plates.

"It matters?" Wilbur questioned, raising an eyebrow at the hybrid.

"Yes," Techno said. "That's your chair. Tommy, you're over here."

Tommy exchanged an amused glance with Wilbur, rounding the table to take the seat Techno had assigned him. He smiled in embarrassment at the breakfast that had been placed in front of him; it looked wonderful, but a little childish with the bear-shaped toast slices and fruit.

"Technoblade," Wilbur called sweetly. "What the fuck is this?"

Tommy choked a laugh as Wilbur held up a rather pathetic looking slice of bread, the majority of which was missing in the suspicious shape of the bear cutouts on Tommy's plate.

"Your breakfast," Techno replied evenly, sitting down next to Tommy.

Phil had covered his mouth with a hand, struggling not to laugh as Wilbur glared daggers at Techno.

"This isn't breakfast," Wilbur said. "This is fucking *leftovers*."

"We didn't have enough bread."

"That is a lie, I went shopping *yesterday*— "

Tommy snickered as the two began to argue loudly back and forth, and Phil smiled happily at him from across the table, already digging into what looked like hash browns.

"Is the breakfast to *your* standards, at least?" the man asked, amused.

"This is the nicest breakfast I've had in ages, Primes," Tommy admitted with a laugh. He picked up a piece of bear-shaped toast, making a face. "Though I don't see why cutting my toast like this was necessary."

"Yeah, exactly!" Wilbur snapped, pointing at Tommy. "If you hadn't given him *baby* breakfast, I wouldn't have had fucking *scraps*— "

"He's a child," Techno said coolly, patting Tommy's upper arm. "I wanted his breakfast to look nice."

"And what about mine?!"

Tommy exchanged an amused glance with Phil, unable to stifle his laughter any longer. Even with Techno and Wilbur's constant bickering in the background, he couldn't deny how happy and safe he felt in their company. With a warm face, he recalled the observation his sleepy mind had made about the movie the previous night, and how it could be applied now, to this — *they were like a family*.

He shook his head, clearing the thoughts. He couldn't afford to entertain such ideas. (Even if his heart longed for it, and wished that it could be true.)

He was just their assistant, their employee. He couldn't get ahead of himself.

Following breakfast, the heroes had suited up and headed down to floor seventy-nine, Tommy in tow. Apparently, the entire floor was a dedicated training space; it had everything from obstacle courses and practice dummies to wide, open sparring areas and a wall of targets for all kinds of weapons and enhancements. Tommy's eyes were huge as he took in every aspect of the floor; Primes, if only he could try things out for himself. His magic buzzed under his skin at the thought.

Almost more impressive were the three new faces waiting for them, alongside Sam, who waved cheerily in greeting. Tommy recognised them instantly.

First from the left was the fox hybrid Fundy, characteristic ears pricked in mild interest and tail lying still. His eyes followed Tommy curiously, though were pulled from him and into an eye roll as Wilbur stepped forward to ruffle his patrol partner's hair. His enhancement was super speed, Tommy knew; Quackity had lamented more than once about how irritatingly difficult it was to outrun the hero, even with his own enhancement of good fortune.

Beside Fundy stood the tall Eret; their gaze was impossible to track behind signature black-tinted sunglasses, but their smile seemed warm enough as SBI joined the group, Tommy lingering behind. Eret's power was that of illusions; they could plant images in people's minds so realistic that it was near impossible to differentiate them from reality. Apparently though, they could only create the *image* — so it would not be tangible. Those were the rumours, at least.

On the other side of Sam was the third of the heroes Tommy was meeting for the first time, and one of the more renowned in the Watchtower. Foolish was often regarded to be in the same league as Dream and Philza, though didn't have an official team to back him. He was a curiosity, reported to be a hybrid though lacking the telltale features of one; supposedly what he did have was the abilities of a hybrid *alongside* his enhancement, which was certainly a deadly combination. All Tommy knew for sure was that the hero could take almost any hit like it was nothing; he could walk away unharmed from the most brutal of battles. The public said he had nine lives; Tommy reckoned it was more than that.

"You must be Tommy," Foolish spoke up, breaking into a wide grin as he noticed the boy's presence. "Nice to finally meet you."

"Do you really have a plushie line?" Tommy blurted.

Despite the warm embarrassment that rose in Tommy's cheeks, Foolish only laughed good-naturedly.

"I do!" he replied cheerfully. "Well, they're not released yet. But they will be soon!"

"He hasn't shut up about them since the designs came out," Eret mused. Tommy startled; her voice was deeper than even Techno's. "Pleased to meet you, Tommy. I'm Eret."

"Of course," Tommy said, stepping forward to shake the hero's hand. "No need for introductions on your end."

"Or yours," Fundy cut in. "Wil never shuts up about you."

Tommy caught Wilbur's eye curiously, though the hero didn't acknowledge him, opting instead to pull Fundy into a headlock and mess up his hair.

"I suggest *you* shut up right now," Wilbur growled, grin a little too wide and face red.

Fundy, despite Wilbur's threats, did not shut up. "It's always Tommy did this today, Tommy said that, it was so funny Fundy, I lo—"

"So how about that training, huh?" Wilbur cut him off loudly, clamping a hand over Fundy's mouth. "We should really — *eugh*, did you *lick* me?!"

Techno stepped forward, nudging Tommy with an amused expression. Tommy was still a little caught up in what Fundy had been saying, but returned the smile, face red.

"We have uneven numbers, so someone's gonna have to sit out if we're doing team sparring," Techno said.

Tommy bit his cheek thoughtfully. "I could—"

"Absolutely not," Phil said, shutting him down before Tommy could get another word out. "You are injured."

"And completely untrained," Wilbur added, raising an eyebrow. "We'd beat the shit out of you."

"And... a good deal younger than the rest of us," Techno contributed, choosing his words carefully in front of the other heroes. *They* didn't know he was only sixteen. "It wouldn't be a fair fight."

"Dear Primes, you're all so protective," Fundy mused with a snort. "I thought it was just Wil —"

Wilbur turned on the shorter hero again, and he closed his mouth himself this time.

Tommy pouted. "It would be fun, though."

Techno glanced at him thoughtfully.

"Fun wouldn't be my first choice of adjective," Eret murmured, amused by the sentiment. "Training is rough most days."

"You can sit out first, then," Foolish teased.

Sam stepped up, shooting a grin at Tommy. "I'll sit out first, I don't mind."

Phil met his gaze pointedly. "And that means *sit* out," he warned good-naturedly. "No sneaking Tommy off to your lab."

Tommy looked hopefully at Sam, who chuckled. "Whatever would give you that idea, Phil?" the hero teased.

"Insight," Phil replied, amused. "Keep my assistant where I can see him, please."

Tommy laughed, and didn't even notice the dull ache in his shoulders anymore. Yeah, maybe he shouldn't have gone to work, and maybe Ranboo wasn't the happiest about it, and maybe Ranboo was right about a lot of things. But when it came to trusting SBI, he wanted to make his own decisions. And his own decision was that given time, maybe he could trust them with every part of himself; even the part that involved an illegal occupation.

But given time, there was plenty to come that would test that trust, and test *him*. Given time, perhaps there was little time at all.

Chapter End Notes

in other words, i hope you've all been enjoying the fluff of the last two chapters <3 good things never last, huh :)

shoutouts to alex, hero and mayx for the philza merch ideas, and shoutout again to mayx for the breakfast idea and the wonderful meme akdhakdhaj

ALSO IF IN FUTURE YOU ARE READING THIS AS A COMPLETED WORK,,, this is a mandatory rest stop take care of urselves <3

The Edge of a Precipice

Chapter Summary

Finally able to patrol again, Tommy begins to notice some worrying patterns that don't look great for the future.

TW// mild descriptions of violence, guns, fire

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for [notes](#)

The rest of the week passed in a blur as Tommy slowly recovered from his injuries — both mental and physical. It wasn't as quick a process as he had been hoping; even when he finally convinced Ranboo to remove his stitches and that he was healed enough to return to patrolling, he found there was some sort of subconscious block to putting on the suit again. Flashes of fire and smoke had begun to creep into his waking hours as well as his dreams, and more nights than he cared to admit he would wake drenched in sweat, trying to shake off the sensation of being trapped.

He was fortunate that he wasn't alone those nights. Even if Ranboo was asleep, Ghostbur would appear, as though summoned by Tommy's distress. He was decent company, if a little insistent on constantly marking Tommy with more blue, but Tommy didn't mind what the ghost said or did. He just appreciated having someone there to distract him.

He didn't even mind the blue stains so much, after multiple incidents of the ghost marking him. It had been embarrassing, at first; the most mortifying to date had been after training that morning at the Watchtower, when he'd moved his hair just the right way and revealed the blue kiss on his forehead to every hero in the building. Fundy especially had a field day over it, holding it over Wilbur's head the rest of the morning.

Nearly as bad had been when Ranboo inevitably noticed the marks, because he didn't have Wilbur with him to pass the job of explaining onto; instead, *Tommy* had to tell his roommate about the ghost of one of his employers, who was fond enough of him to the point of kissing his forehead goodnight. Needless to say, his ears had been burning in embarrassment afterwards, though even Ranboo admitted it was quite cute.

His roommate *wasn't* so happy about the news that Ghostbur had visited — and would likely continue to visit — their apartment at night for the foreseeable future. To be fair, Tommy wasn't over the moon about that either, but there didn't seem to be any stopping the ghost. Fortunately, Wilbur seemed to have a somewhat consistent bedtime, so Tommy had been noting the times Ghostbur showed up and left and simply planned his patrols around them.

Things were going well. Techno hadn't said or done anything else suspicious, Ghostbur was sticking to his word and hiding the apartment from Wilbur, and Phil was just happy that Tommy was healing so quickly. Another week gone, and his identity remained secure.

(Another week gone, and the weight of his lies remained as heavy as ever.)

When it came time for his first patrol since the cinema incident, putting on the suit wasn't easy. In his days off, the subconscious aversion to donning the suit had grown firm; as he zipped up the material over his chest, it was hard to shake how it felt suffocating against his skin. It had survived the ceiling collapsing relatively unharmed, as opposed to Tommy himself, though the smell of smoke clung to his mask, and grit and dust seemed to have become intertwined with the fabric.

He pushed through it. He always did.

Besides — once he was out in the air, boosting himself across rooftops and letting his magic flow free, it was a little easier to force a smile and forget his troubles. He settled into his routine again smoothly. Once he pretended he couldn't feel his skin crawling or rubble on his shoulders for long enough, he could ignore the feelings altogether.

Thankfully, crime didn't seem any worse than it had been before his little break. He worked his way around the district, intercepting a few small robberies and gang fights. The map on his suit made locating each incident much easier than it had been before, allowing him to mark where he'd been that night and even anonymously ping the local police once he had left the scene.

For his first night back, there was nothing too strenuous, which he was grateful for. If anything, it felt *too* easy; but maybe he'd been preparing for the worst.

That was when he swung by the border with fifteenth, and things started to escalate. There was angry shouting and gunshots loud enough to be heard from several streets away — and sure, it wasn't his area, but Tommy wasn't about to ignore a situation like that. People could be in danger. By the sounds of things, people *were* in danger.

So he steeled himself, gathered his magic in his hands, and hurried over.

It seemed to be a gang fight of some sort, which wasn't anything new; though this was definitely one of the more violent ones Tommy had seen. The alleyway they were fighting in was narrow and cluttered; two dumpsters were alight with flames and bullets were being fired back and forth without a care, echoing loudly between the walls of the buildings.

"Fuck's sake, someone's gonna get killed," Tommy muttered, and dropped down into the middle of it.

It was a damn good thing he'd had the sense to put up walls of his magic preemptively, as the gunshots did not cease. If anything, his presence seemed to spur them on even more.

"Theseus!" someone shouted.

Huh, I guess my tremendous fame and clout extends even beyond fourteenth, Tommy mused. *Well, time to get to work.*

He held his magical shields steady as he launched his power at who he figured were the gun wielders, though his defense wasn't perfect. A metal bat came swinging at his head as someone slipped past the barriers, and he had to drop them altogether as he put his focus into dodging the attack.

He probably should have done a head count before throwing himself into the chaos, though it was a little too late now. More than one pair of hands were grabbing at him from behind, and as the bat came swinging again, he only just caught it in time with his magic. He launched his attacker away with a second blast, and then dropped into a crouch to shake off whoever was behind him. They stumbled, and he shot up again, whipping around to fling them back. Unfortunately, he hadn't accounted for that many people being behind him.

He was left staring straight down the barrel of a gun.

The shot was deafening, rattling Tommy's skull so hard he thought perhaps he'd been hit, or died — but as his vision came back into focus, ears ringing and head reeling, he realised the bullet hadn't so much as grazed him. The gunman's aim had been completely thrown off by something.

"Ay, that was a nice hit, right?" a voice taunted.

Tommy glanced up, surprised; perched above the alleyway, short wings flared and smirk wide, was the familiar face of a fellow vigilante.

"But I guess I'm just lucky," Quackity continued with a shrug. He had a rock in hand, which he was casually throwing and catching with ease. "How about another try?"

He fired the rock with a flick of his wrist, and this time it hit the distracted man right in the temple. Tommy didn't hesitate to send him flying with a blast of magic, red wisps lingering in the air as Quackity hopped down.

"Long time no see, mi amigo!" the duck hybrid greeted him cheerfully. "Don't usually see you around these parts."

"I don't usually patrol here," Tommy admitted; there was no point in signing when he'd spoken to Quackity on several occasions before with his voice, and he doubted the man knew sign language anyway. "Do you?"

Quackity stepped past him momentarily, extending his staff to strike an approaching attacker in the stomach before acknowledging the question.

"Karl has been missing in action for a little while now," he explained quickly. "I took fifteenth under my wing in his absence."

"Primes, Big Q, how many districts do you patrol now?"

Quackity laughed. "Too many!"

Tommy grinned, covering the vigilante's back as he hurled another gang member away with his magic. He had never fought with Quackity on his side before, but they fell into an easy rhythm, each covering one side of the alleyway as they remained back-to-back. Quackity was armed with his staff and good fortune, Tommy his magic — it didn't take too long to clear up the situation between the two of them.

Tommy clenched his jaw as the last of the gang made a run for it, and set his eyes on one of the flaming dumpsters. His magic reached out immediately, curling around the dumpster and whipping it out from the wall to block the man's exit.

"All yours," he said, and Quackity grinned, stepping forward.

"Fuck off — fuck you — fuck," the man stammered, hands fumbling around in his pockets.

Tommy reacted on instinct, his enhancement flaring up to shield him as another gun was produced. Quackity wasn't fazed, however, and continued to stalk towards the man, twirling his metal staff between his fingers.

Bang — bang — bang—

Yet not a single bullet hit the vigilante.

"Unlucky," Quackity mused, and with a single strike, the man was out cold.

Tommy heaved a sigh, letting his magic relax. The aftermath of a fight always felt a little strange, adrenaline still pumping as his guard slowly lowered while unconscious bodies littered the ground. He let a hand fall to his side and marked the location on the map in his suit while Quackity made his way around to each of them, taking their weapons into his arms.

"What do you do with those?" Tommy questioned, raising an eyebrow at the hybrid.

Quackity straightened, grin wide but wings shifting guiltily. "There's good money to be made in selling weapons."

Tommy made a face. "That's definitely illegal."

"So are the criminals I source them from," Quackity replied with a shrug. "I'm taking weapons away from dangerous people."

"And giving them to *other* dangerous people," Tommy argued, folding his arms. "I doubt your buyers are exactly moral."

Quackity's smirk faltered. "Desperate times, desperate measures," he said. "We don't get paid for what we do, so I have to bring in the cash from somewhere."

Hopefully that'll be changing real soon, Tommy thought, though didn't mention the program. Phil could do his own advertising.

"Speaking of," Quackity added, eyeing him up and down. "How'd you manage to afford that fancy thing? Looks like a pretty expensive suit."

"I—" Tommy paused, biting his cheek as he considered his words. He didn't want to give away too much, especially given he wasn't sure how Quackity would react to him being aided

by official heroes. Just as Wilbur wasn't fond of vigilantes, some of them returned that sentiment in kind. "It's a long story."

"Just like your whole mute thing?" Quackity pressed, though his eyes gleamed in amusement. "I'm not sure what you're up to, mi amigo, but you seem to be doing well for yourself."

"I am," Tommy admitted with a light laugh, thinking fondly of the three people in the Watchtower he owed so much too. "I hope you are too."

Quackity shrugged. "I patrol more often than anything else these days. Things are getting crazy all over the city, man, people disappearing, random attacks. Less vigilantes doing any real good."

"Shit," Tommy muttered with a frown. "Y'know, if you want, I can take over fifteenth, it's right beside fourteenth anyway—"

"Nah man, I've got it under control," Quackity said. He glanced sideways, smile falling. "Let me know if you see Karl, though. I'm... worried about him."

Tommy softened. "Of course," he replied. "I'll keep an eye out. Plus I'll probably be around fifteenth anyway, now that I know he's not."

Quackity shook his head, amusement returning to his expression as quick as it had left. "I had a feeling you would," he laughed. "Thanks. Theseus, right?"

Tommy shrugged, and pretended his heart didn't warm at the name Techno had given him. "I guess that's what they're calling me."

"Not bad," Quackity remarked. His wings ruffled behind him, and he gathered up his armful of weapons a little tighter to his chest. "I should probably get going. A lot of ground to cover, you know how it is."

"Course," Tommy said. He grinned at the man. "Good seeing you again, Big Q."

"You too, man," Quackity responded. His wings unfolded and his knees bent, prepared for takeoff. "If you ever need a hand, you know I'll help out."

"I know where to find you," Tommy assured him. As many districts as Quackity apparently did patrol now, seventh was his home district.

"Adios!"

Tommy saluted the vigilante as Quackity took to the skies. He glanced around the alleyway once more before he made his own leave, and deemed it safe enough to let the fires continue burning; the intensity of the flames had at least reduced since he first dropped down, and there wasn't much he could do to extinguish them anyway. He just didn't want anyone he'd left knocked out on the ground to get hurt (any worse) in the time it took police to arrive. Speaking of, it was probably safe to ping the authorities.

His finger didn't quite hit the button before he was distracted by movement in the corner of his eye.

Tommy paused, squinting across the street into the darkness of an alley opposite him. He could've sworn.... But nothing else moved in spite of his staring, and he relaxed. It must have been nothing.

He returned his focus to his previous task, and double tapped the interactive screen on his upper leg. The police would be notified of a crime in the area, and come and do clean-up for him. He grinned to himself; maybe, given enough incidents where vigilantes had clearly done their job for them, people would actually come around and vigilantes wouldn't have such a bad reputation.

Tommy gathered his magic into his hands, prepared to boost himself back to the rooftops, and that's when he saw it again.

There was most definitely a shadow moving in the alley across the street.

He snapped his head in its direction, staring intensely. Nothing moved when he was so focused on it, but he was sure he could still make it out; a figure lingering in the darkness. Tommy tensed, breathing a little quicker as his heart drummed against his ribs. It wasn't necessarily a threat; maybe someone needed help.

He refused to acknowledge the logic that most people who meant no harm didn't hide in the shadows. That was probably his first mistake.

Tommy cried out more so from shock than pain as he was slammed with a piercing headache; he stumbled onto his knees as sharp agony stabbed through his skull. There was a thrumming in his ears and a flashing in his eyes; white hot pressure sent his head reeling as he clawed desperately at his head, jaw clenched and everything *too tight too tight too tight*—

His magic spiked to fight off the intrusion, gathering in his skull like a spark to a fuse before *exploding* from his head. Tommy's chest heaved as he kneeled on the pavement, sweet relief healing the invisible wounds of the sudden migraine as his magic flooded it out. He pushed himself to his feet, whirling his magic in the direction of the alley as suddenly as he could manage, still gasping for air.

The red power hit the brick wall of the building and dissipated. The shadow was gone.

"Fuckin'... prick," Tommy hissed, struggling to regain his balance. "Fuck was that for?"

There was nobody there to answer him. Red and blue lights were piercing the dark in the distance, and he huffed under his breath. He couldn't even stick around and track the guy.

Quackity was right, he mused. *Too many enhanced people just fucking around with their powers.* What a dumb power, though, to give people migraines? He much preferred his magic.

Still, seeing fifteenth growing so violent was worrying. Karl was always so thorough in putting a halt to any brutalities on the streets; Tommy knew the man wouldn't give up vigilantism unless his hand had been forced. A lump rose in his throat at the thought that maybe his disappearance was like Bad's in a way, that he too had been taken and twisted and would emerge later with red eyes and a thirst for blood.

Red eyes. He made a face; there was something about them that didn't sit right with him. First Skeppy, then Bad — and several people causing crime in the streets. He wasn't sure what was going on, or whether the incidents were connected, but things were definitely suspicious. Combined with the increasing violence all across the city, he felt rather as though they were all standing on the edge of a precipice, one stumble away from something big.

Fortunately, the stumble had yet to come. Things remained calm for some time; it wasn't for another few days that the first thing went wrong.

When Tommy returned home from work one night, Ranboo wasn't there.

He didn't let himself panic immediately; his roommate easily could have been out shopping or walking or doing who knows what — it wasn't like they had rules against leaving the house. Sure, Tommy rarely ever came back to an empty apartment, but that didn't mean disaster was afoot.

So he kept himself busy. He made dinner — spaghetti, Ranboo's favourite, as if the smell would entice him home — and when there was still no sign of the boy, he started tinkering with his suit. He hadn't looked for a tracker yet; part of him had been scared to in case he really found one. At least he had been there to help code and build several hero suits with Sam, and so had a fair idea of what to search for as he tapped through settings on one of the screens.

Tracker: Disabled

Tommy blinked, not sure if that was a relief or not. It meant there had been a tracker, but at some point, or hopefully from the beginning, it hadn't been active. He decided to set that thought aside for later.

Ranboo still didn't come home.

Tommy ate cold spaghetti by himself as he sent his friend several texts that went unopened. Eventually, he put away the food, stomach churning. His finger hovered over the call button. He wasn't being clingy, was he? He was just concerned.

He pressed call. Ranboo didn't pick up.

Tommy swallowed bile and called again, foot tapping against cracked tile as he listened to the irritable tone of the call all the way through. Again. Again. Again.

No response.

This continued for the best part of half an hour, the pit of dread in Tommy's stomach sinking further and further into him the longer his calls went ignored. Had something happened? Was Ranboo safe? Maybe he'd lost his phone — or gotten mugged, or... kidnapped?

Tommy took a shaky inhale, pressing the call button one more time. One more time, and then he was heading out to go look for him himself. Identity be damned, he'd fight tooth and nail if Ranboo was in danger.

The door opened.

Tommy faltered, ringing phone still in hand as he glanced to the entrance of their apartment; there stood Ranboo, alive and safe and well but *exhausted*. His arms were wrapped around himself, ears flat against his skull and tail low to the ground. His eyes met Tommy's for a moment, wide and watery before he blinked hard, glancing away. His chin wobbled.

"Tommy—"

Tommy snapped out of his trance immediately, hanging up the phone and practically tossing it aside as he hurried over. "Shit — Ranboo — are you okay? I've been trying to get a hold of you for ages, man."

Ranboo let his roommate gently guide him further into the apartment, though flinched as the door closed behind him. He was trembling all over, struggling to find his voice.

"I'm sorry—"

"No, it's fine, *you're* fine, you're here now," Tommy assured him softly. "You don't have to apologise, it's all okay—"

"No, *Tommy* ," Ranboo pressed, grabbing a firm hold of Tommy's arms. His voice cracked. "I'm so sorry — I lost — I lost my job."

Tommy faltered, torn between processing all the implications of that statement and comforting his friend. He shook his head, focusing instead on helping Ranboo out of his summer raincoat and into a chair before he collapsed.

"That's — yeah, that's, um," he stammered, and swallowed hard, giving up on whatever weak solace he'd been trying to offer. "Are you okay? Are you — what happened?"

"I got — he *fired* me," Ranboo whispered shakily. "Something happened, but I don't — I can't remember anything, Tommy, I don't *remember!*"

"That's okay," Tommy said, wincing, because it *wasn't* okay, it wasn't okay in the slightest and they couldn't live off of one income and he'd never seen Ranboo so upset. "Why did he fire you?"

"He said I—" Ranboo paused, and then a sob was ripped from his throat, shaking his shoulders from the effort of it. "He said I attacked someone, Tom — I wouldn't — I would *never*— "

"I know, I know," Tommy murmured, easing Ranboo into a hug; the hybrid threw himself into Tommy's chest, clutching at him as if holding on for dear life. The dam had well and truly broken as he cried in earnest. Harsh sobs wracked his body and pressed him for breath; Tommy rubbed circles into his back, deep concern twisting his stomach into knots and rising in his throat like bile.

"I *swear* I wouldn't," Ranboo cried, words muffled against Tommy's shoulder. "But I can't remember anything, and he wouldn't — he wouldn't show me the camera footage, he just — he just threw me out—"

"I know you wouldn't," Tommy assured his roommate, his best friend, his *brother*, "you would never hurt anyone."

Ranboo took a trembling inhale as he slowly pulled back from the embrace, and Tommy wiped his cheeks, which were sure to be agitated by the tears. The hybrid heaved a couple more dry sobs, still shaking.

"Here," Tommy said, standing. "I made dinner earlier, you should eat."

"Can't," Ranboo whispered, and Tommy's heart wrenched as he met the older's watery gaze. "You should save it."

Tommy paused, wincing. He knew exactly what Ranboo meant. "We'll be fine," he tried to insist, though wasn't sure who he was convincing. "You'll get another job soon anyway — you always do, and I can ask the landlord for an extension on the rent—"

"They won't give us any more," Ranboo mumbled. "You know they won't."

"You're — you've gotta be hungry," Tommy pleaded, wilting.

Ranboo lowered him a gaze heavy with dismay and worry. "You will be too."

Tommy didn't have a response for that. He glanced at their fridge, where Ranboo's share of dinner had been put away, and wondered how much food they actually had. Maybe enough for the week, if they stretched it. And then he would get paid, and okay, most of that would be going towards rent — which he was going to kill their landlord for raising again — but they could afford another couple days' worth of food after that, and still pay the electricity and water bills; they'd long given up on the heating, they survived without it—

"What if I ender-walked?"

Tommy froze, head snapping up to meet Ranboo's gaze. The hybrid looked away from the eye contact, uneasy and distressed.

"It hasn't happened in so long, but maybe — maybe I—"

Tommy stumbled back to his roommate's side, concern etching deep lines into his face as Ranboo began to work himself up again. "You have that under control, Ranboo, you're so careful—"

"But it makes sense, why I — why I can't remember it, or if—" Ranboo's face scrunched up in horror, eyes welling up once more. "If I *hurt* someone—"

"Listen to me," Tommy interrupted, soft but firm, and crouched in front of his friend. He held his face in his hands, thumbing away the tears that threatened to fall. "You would never hurt anyone, Ranboo. You know that. I know that. I don't know what happened at your work today, but I *do* know this — it's not your fault."

"But I—"

"It's not your fault."

Ranboo blinked hard, hiccuping as he raised a shaky hand to lie over Tommy's. He gave it an appreciative squeeze.

"It's not your fault," Tommy repeated gently. "Don't listen to that voice in your head."

Ranboo didn't seem fully convinced, but Tommy wasn't sure all the words in the world would reassure him. He gave a subtle nod.

"I should start job-searching," he mumbled. "Or maybe I can sell some of my clothes, or something—"

"You don't need to sell anything, we'll be fine," Tommy said. He wished the confidence with which he said such words had a real foundation. "Go to bed, Ranboo. You look exhausted."

"Yeah," Ranboo agreed quietly. He let Tommy help him out of the chair, and began heading for the bedroom. "You can take the mattress—"

"No," Tommy said, voice firm. "You take it. I'll stay up another while anyway."

Ranboo shot him a look that was almost disappointed. "Don't patrol."

Tommy shook his head. "I have to," he argued. "The city's going through a rough patch. I gotta keep an eye out for any other poor roommates walking home alone in the dark."

Ranboo managed a weak smile. "You're so stubborn."

"Always, big man. Now go rest."

"Goodnight, Tommy."

"Night, Ranboob."

The weak joke landed well enough, and Tommy allowed himself some relief as he caught Ranboo's smile before the hybrid disappeared into their bedroom. The kitchen felt suddenly cold in his absence; a chilling realisation of the situation they now faced.

Tommy and Ranboo had never known a life with a lot of money, growing up in the orphanage, jumping from one foster family to another. When they'd finally escaped the system with enough pocket money saved up to rent their tiny apartment, they'd dived straight into the working world. During the school months, a government pay covered what they lost from reduced hours, though over the summer they were completely on their own. Which usually worked fine. They both worked full-time, and between the two of them, they could cover rent, bills, food, all the necessities. Over the years, they'd afforded other things that still remained in the apartment. The mattress. The table and chair. The boxy TV.

But one income wasn't enough to live comfortably. They'd done it before, when they really had to; when Tommy could no longer work at Bad's, before he'd gotten the job at the Watchtower, for example. But Tommy was still new to patrol back then, and less active; and Ranboo's job had always paid more. Phil was not unkind about Tommy's pay, but neither was he unfair, and doing casual jobs here and there six hours a day didn't warrant a big payout.

Cutbacks were going to have to be made. They'd done it before. They'd be fine. Ranboo would get another job within the week; he had a track record of getting every job he applied for with one interview.

Tommy squashed back the other thoughts, that job prospects for someone who'd just been fired on the basis of violence towards coworkers were probably slim. Or that he was now patrolling two districts in a city that had grown more violent, and cutbacks on food were going to affect him a little more drastically this time around.

He couldn't afford to entertain those thoughts, not now, even if he'd have no choice later. For now, he had to keep it together. For Ranboo.

He owed him that much.

Chapter End Notes

yall see all those linked works?? you better be reading them because most of them so far are fics in the ncfc universe and they are so good!!

back to angst town babey B)

RaccoonInnit

Chapter Summary

Tommy struggles to keep everything together after the loss of Ranboo's job, all while fighting off the hunger pangs.

TW// mild descriptions of violence, disordered eating

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for [notes](#)

Ranboo's job loss made a steep, slippery downhill slope of their lives. It wasn't his fault; Tommy knew that, and would stand by the statement as long as he had the strength to do so. But providing for the two of them from his own singular income was significantly more difficult than he'd been prepared for. The worst part had been adjusting to the lower intake of food; his stomach had cramped initially in disagreement with the new conditions, though had since relaxed. Now he just felt weak, and it was a feeling he despised.

As hard as Tommy had it, however, he had a sinking feeling Ranboo was faring far worse.

Not because Ranboo was more active than him, but it was obvious that he was blaming himself for putting them into such a situation. He had actually landed an interview for a part-time job within a few days of losing his last one, but for the first time in his life, he didn't get the job. He hadn't gotten any other interviews since.

He was a mess, and as much as Tommy did to try and lift his spirits or comfort him, it all seemed to be in vain. Ranboo had always been a solid support for Tommy in times of need, but he himself crumpled under any pressure, and he had taken the full burden of being responsible for their current living conditions. He was convinced he had ended-walked, terrified he had seriously hurt someone, and suffering the guilt of what he'd done to himself and Tommy — and there was virtually nothing Tommy could do to remedy the situation.

But he'd be damned if he didn't at least *try*.

It took him a while to come up with something. There was nothing he could magically create that would provide them with food or pay the bills, but it wasn't impossible to offer Ranboo support or comfort in other ways. It finally clicked when he was in the lab with Sam one morning.

"So Theseus' suit tracker went offline a couple weeks ago," Sam had noted. They were working on an upgraded comms system for SBI, but it wasn't out of the ordinary for Sam to bring up other things as they worked. "Got the alert on my phone. I don't think anyone had been watching it anyway, but it's odd that it was disabled."

Tommy only hummed in agreement. Gears were turning in his own head; if it *had* been active, had anyone seen where he returned to each night? It would only have been a matter of time before they put two and two together and realised his true identity. And if they hadn't seen it, why turn it off? If they had, why hadn't anyone said anything to him?

"Maybe it malfunctioned?" he suggested, biting his cheek.

"Maybe," Sam mused. "Though the piece is still intact; I could enable it again now if I wanted to."

Tommy's heart dropped like a stone. *Maybe don't do that.* "Who else has access to it?"

"Just SBI, since they're hooked up to the emergency button as well," Sam replied. "I guess someone had a reason to disable the tracker. I'll ask Phil later."

Tommy frowned. It didn't make sense for Phil to have turned off the tracker; he doubted the man even spared Theseus a moment of thought in his busy schedule. Wilbur certainly wouldn't trust the vigilante enough to disable the tracker... but that left Techno.

He swallowed. *Would he? Does he know?*

Sam blinked back in surprise as the earpiece he was working on sparked. Tommy watched him, eyebrows furrowing in thought.

"But if the tracker's disabled... does that mean the emergency button doesn't work?"

Sam glanced up. "Nope. In case of emergency, any other settings are overridden. Since they would need his location, the tracker is activated again."

Tommy nodded. Not that he had any more intention on using the button than he'd had when it was first installed, but it had been an interesting question.

The idea came to light like the spark beneath Sam's hands.

He could give *Ranboo* an emergency button — that way, if his roommate was worried about losing control again, he could press it when he felt himself slipping and Tommy could come to his aid. Even if he couldn't pull Ranboo out of his enderwalk state, he could at the very least act as damage control.

They weren't even sure that Ranboo *had* ender-walked; he hadn't in so long. But Tommy knew it would comfort the hybrid to have the knowledge that Tommy would be there in an instant at the press of a button. Plus, it offered safety in general, and Tommy would feel better about letting Ranboo leave the house alone in the violent city.

It was a perfect idea. The only issue was putting it together.

"How do you even make an emergency button?" he asked, as casually as he could manage.

"Screwdriver," Sam called, and Tommy passed him the tool. He continued as he worked, "it's not too complicated, really. Just need a GPS and a connection to whatever device or devices you want it to ping when the button is pressed. The coding is simpler than most stuff I work on here."

Tommy took a breath. Time for more lies. "Just 'cause I think I might get back into tech stuff again. Fun hobby, y'know?"

Sam didn't seem to catch the subtle waver in his tone, only nodding in agreement. "I'd be happy to help," he said with a smile, "though there are easier things to start off with than emergency buttons—"

"I have past experience anyway," Tommy reminded him hastily. "I just think it would be really neat, y'know."

"Yeah, alright," Sam said happily. "Though I doubt Phil will let you down here during working hours for a hobby."

"I have break hours," Tommy blurted eagerly. He paused, wondering if that was something he was supposed to share. Sam still didn't know he was only sixteen.

"Right, and you're free to come in here then, but *I'll* still be working," Sam said with an amused smile. "I can get Hannah to bump up your keycard level so you have access to the lab. But if you do want my help, we'll have to do lunchtimes."

"That's okay!" Tommy agreed instantly. "Lunchtimes. Yeah, we can do that."

Sam grinned. "Great. We'll just need a few extra materials, because I don't have everything on hand."

"I can pick them up," Tommy offered, keen to start working on Ranboo's gift as soon as he could. His chest was bubbling with excitement at the thought of bringing a smile to his roommate's face again, and any other thoughts had been frantically pushed back.

"Cool," Sam said. "I'll send a list up to Phil later today. There's a nice place not far from the tower that stocks everything I use."

"When can we start?"

Sam smiled at his eagerness. "Tomorrow, I guess, if you can pick up the materials today."

"Alright," Tommy agreed, nodding vigorously. "Yeah, okay. I can do that."

It was not until much later did his head clear and he realised how much he had actually agreed to. As he scoffed down a bacon and potato dinner prepared by Wilbur and Techno, the food beating off the dizziness in his head and the growling in his empty stomach, he began reading through the list Sam had just sent up and felt his heart sink.

First of all, the shop Sam had pointed him in the direction of was in the first district, just as the Watchtower itself was. There wasn't anything from the most well-off district in the city Tommy could afford, much less from a professional tech shop that directly supplied the labs of the heroes' tower.

Secondly, he had just dedicated not only his break hours, but also his mealtimes to the project. Lunch and dinner with SBI was one of the only things getting himself and Ranboo through each day, as he relished in the well-done dishes and snuck home as much as he could from his plate to Ranboo. If the making of this emergency button took too long, he was going to run right out of steam.

But it was going to be worth it. To offer Ranboo safety and something to fall back on; to lift his spirits, even just a bit.

They'd work out the money and the food later.

His current biggest issue was actually sourcing the right materials that Sam was missing, given there wasn't a chance in hell he could afford to buy them on top of all of their other

financial struggles at the moment. Fortunately, growing up poor meant he wasn't completely unprepared. Even if his methods were ones he preferred not to resort to, he had at least a chance of finding what he needed in decent enough condition to bring to Sam — and for free. Ranboo hadn't called him RaccoonInnit for nothing.

And this time, Ranboo didn't even have to know. No nickname.

It was just that dumpster diving... sucked.

There was nothing dignifying about sorting through rotten food and bad smells and rubbish in search of things of use. One man's trash was another man's treasure, but most of the time it was just... trash.

But he would take those chances. For Ranboo.

He suited up that evening much earlier than usual. Not only was he now on the hunt for Sam's materials, but he had fifteenth to patrol as well — which he still hadn't told Ranboo about. He knew his roommate was skeptical as he eyed him on his way out, but didn't want to worry him any more than he was already.

"You've barely been home two hours," Ranboo mused, picking carefully through what food Tommy had managed to sneak home. "Already patrolling?"

Tommy shrugged as he zipped up the suit, not quite meeting his friend's gaze. "Figured I might get home early that way," he said. "Get more sleep in."

The excuse seemed to appease Ranboo, who nodded in understanding. "Good idea. Though Ghostbur's gonna be looking for you."

Tommy smiled weakly at the thought. He was no Wilbur, but Ghostbur had become a fast friend of Tommy's; there was rarely a night when he didn't visit to say hello and "tuck them into bed" (before Tommy left to patrol). He hadn't gone unmarked with blue since meeting

the ghost; if ever it faded, a new stain was left immediately to replace it. Even Ranboo ended up with the odd streak of blue on his arms or face, and though he was not as quick to trust Ghostbur, he'd come to accept him as part of their routine.

"Can you cover for me?" Tommy asked, pulling his best pair of puppy eyes. "Just make sure he doesn't try and find me or anything."

Ranboo sighed wearily. "I'll come up with something."

Tommy grinned, pulling down his mask. "You're the best."

Ranboo didn't say anything to that, only offering a weak smile as he met Tommy's gaze with tired eyes. The sight of him so melancholy had concern broiling in Tommy's stomach; he was hunched over their table, swamped by a t-shirt that had fit him better a week ago. He looked smaller than he ever had.

Tommy was going to fix all of this. One step at a time.

"Goodnight Ranboo," he said, stepping towards the kitchen window. "In case I'm not back to say so."

"Night Tommy," was the soft reply, "stay safe."

"Always do, big man."

And with that, he was off. He had a long night ahead of him; guilt pressed against his throat for lying to Ranboo, but it was for the greater good. Once they figured everything out, he could be honest with him once more.

Always lying, a bitter voice taunted him. Liar, liar, liar. Keep spinning your web and you'll only get caught.

He ignored it.

Between his extended area of two districts to patrol *and* keeping an eye out for shiny pieces in dumpsters, Tommy was out that night for hours longer than he was used to . The lack of food wasn't helping his case either; after each fight he needed a good five minutes to catch his breath and recover. His limbs simultaneously felt too difficult to hold up but lighter than they'd ever been.

He hated feeling so weak.

His backpack was slung across his shoulders as he darted into another narrow alleyway in fourteenth. Finally he had gathered enough that he was feeling the weight of his findings on his shoulders; he'd had the luck of coming across a perfectly fine handheld radio not long into his search. On its own, it wasn't what he was looking for, but the value of it was the parts within.

He jumped up onto the open dumpster of this alleyway, holding back a gag as the smell hit him. Ranboo was damn lucky that he was worth all of this.

Tommy decided to get it over quickly, untying the knot of the first bag and gingerly poking around through it. He wrinkled his nose, holding his breath. Nothing but food scraps, plastic, bags... oh, a pair of shorts. He shrugged, stuffing them into his bag.

At the bottom of the dumpster, he finally struck gold.

A digital watch, the screen cracked but otherwise completely intact. The strap was clean, the buttons working; Tommy hadn't really considered it beforehand, but a watch would make a perfect base for the emergency button. On Ranboo's wrist, it would be easy to access and wouldn't look out of place.

Another success for RaccoonInnit.

It was as he hopped up onto a flat rooftop again to head home that he spotted three figures on a roof across the street. He squinted at them curiously, worried people were up to trouble; but relaxed as he recognised the telltale pink braid of a familiar hero. Technoblade was in fourteenth again, and he'd brought two friends. The three stood still where they were, stances casual. Were they waiting for something? For him?

He dropped his backpack on the building he was currently on, wincing as he heard something break inside. Well, he'd been planning on taking it apart anyway. Hopefully the watch was still intact.

Techno glanced up as Tommy arrived on their rooftop, red magic swirling around his feet and hands as he steadied his landing. The hybrid smiled at the sight of the vigilante, and pulled up his skull mask so Tommy could see his eyes.

"Theseus," Techno greeted him happily, finger-spelling his name as he spoke. "I was hoping we'd run into you."

Tommy spared a glance at the two that accompanied Techno; one he recognised immediately, having just been introduced to the hero recently. Eret still wore his characteristic sunglasses alongside his hero suit, which was a regal yet functional combination of a long skirt, flowing cape and chunky heels. There were few others who could pull off the look the way Eret did. It left Tommy even more awestruck than when he'd met the hero in his training gear.

To Eret's side was a slightly shorter masked individual Tommy didn't know at all. Blonde hair peeked out over their purple mask, and even with the matching baggy purple hoodie, it was clear that they had a slither, younger build.

He waved to the pair a little awkwardly, unsure if they knew any sign language. Since spending so much time relearning and practicing sign, he'd become comfortable with it once again, if not more so than he ever had been. Watching people sign as they spoke was like seeing captions on a video; it was a handy back-up if he couldn't process speech in time. He even found himself using it from time to time with Ranboo; thankfully, his vigilance around SBI meant he hadn't slipped up in front of them yet.

"Hello, Theseus," Eret greeted, managing a polite smile. "The Blade has told me much about you."

Tommy was grateful for the mask to hide how his cheeks flushed at the thought. Apparently he was more popular with SBI than he'd realised, between Wilbur gushing about him to Fundy and now Techno telling Eret about his vigilante identity.

"All good things, I hope," he signed, and Techno chuckled.

"All good things," he assured him. "Theseus, I'd like you to meet Eret and Purpled."

"Hey man," the masked kid spoke up, voice betraying his youth as much as his slender build did. He extended a hand to Tommy. "Cool to meet another vigilante. I'm the only one I knew of in tenth."

Tommy blinked in surprise as he shook Purpled's hand; he'd thought maybe the kid was a hero in training or something of the sort, but a vigilante? Just... hanging out with two heroes? That certainly came as a shock. He wondered if this situation was courtesy of Phil's training program; vaguely, he recalled the man mentioning that Eret had been the first to take on an apprentice of sorts.

"You too," he signed in response.

Purpled didn't seem to understand, but nodded regardless. Eret stepped forward to shake Tommy's hand too, and Tommy quickly reminded himself that in Eret's eyes, this was their first meeting.

"How have things been?" Techno asked, an odd tone to his voice, and Tommy was also reminded that this was their first reunion as Theseus and the Blade since the cinema incident. It had certainly been a while.

"Alright," he began, half debating whether or not it was the right time to bring up his concerns over the red-eyed people. He still had no solid foundation to base his theories on, if mild suspicion counted as a theory at all. *"Took a break for a little while. Now I have two districts to patrol."*

Techno frowned at that. "How so? If you need any help—"

Tommy quickly waved him off. *"It's fine. A vigilante in fifteenth went missing, so I'm taking over until he comes back."*

"Missing?" Techno echoed. His eyebrows furrowed together. "Do you know his name?"

Tommy paused. He wasn't sure sharing a vigilante's name with a top hero was his best idea, or if Karl would appreciate him doing so at all — but Techno didn't seem to have anything against vigilantes, and had openly opposed the government's stance on them on multiple occasions. Plus, here he stood in a district he didn't officially patrol, speaking casually with two of them.

And if Karl was really in trouble... it was for the best, right?

"Karl Jacobs," he spelled out, slowly enough for Techno to register each letter. *"I'm not sure how long he's been gone."*

"I'll check city records when we get back to the tower," Techno assured him. "Karl Jacobs... I'm sure someone has filed a missing persons case."

"Thanks."

"You never did come by the tower like I offered," Techno noted, a small smile creeping back into his expression. "You know, that vigilante program is pretty much up and running now."

"They pay pretty well, I'll say that," Purpled chimed in.

Tommy's eyes widened a fraction, stomach growling in eager response to the offer of pay. Primes, he'd nearly forgotten about the benefits of the program; two incomes would as good as save the entire situation he and Ranboo were currently facing. Fuck if he wasn't tempted by the idea. He yearned for a fix to all their issues more than anything at the moment, and the thought of turning down the offer caused him physical pain; but he *couldn't*. Joining the program meant revealing everything, and he couldn't bear the thought of that. They'd probably kick him out for good measure, and he'd be fired, and then he'd really be screwed.

"Slipped my mind," he signed after a moment, wincing as his insides knotted.

"We could make accommodations for you," Techno added, as if reading his mind. "You could keep your identity, I'm sure."

Tommy frowned. Somehow he felt that wasn't entirely the case. How could the Watchtower securely manage and *pay* otherwise illegal individuals without even knowing who they were? They'd need some sort of account to pay, or at least confirmation of ID, surely.

"I'm not available during the day," he settled for.

Techno's smile faltered. "I'm sure we can accommodate that, too—"

"And I can't stay at the tower," he added. He couldn't leave Ranboo alone. Plus, living at his workplace without giving away anything to anyone was just... impossible.

Techno regarded him with a curious look. "I didn't mention anything about staying."

Tommy froze. Oh, *fuck*. Because he had only discussed that as Tommy, with Phil. Theseus shouldn't have known about their plans to accommodate vigilantes in the program in the tower. His throat tightened, mind reeling as he struggled for a quick cover to the slip.

"The apartments will be so cool once they're done, though," Purpled chimed in. Neither he nor Eret seemed to have registered his mistake; he supposed they hadn't been watching his signing. "You should think about it."

"I can't," Tommy insisted, ignoring the ache in his stomach. He glanced at Techno. "You know I can't. You know they won't accommodate all that and still pay me."

Techno didn't reply for a moment, confirming Tommy's thoughts. Tommy could practically see the gears turning in the man's head before he eventually settled on something with a nod of determination. "I can still offer you this," he said, smiling again, and gestured to Purpled. "A training opportunity, if you will. With someone of your own age and skill."

"I might be more skilled, though," Purpled remarked, a light hint of cheek to his tone. "Just a fair warning."

Tommy let his magic flare in his hands in response. Purpled only regarded the motion with a shrug of his shoulders.

"I take it you're down, then?" Techno noted cheerfully. "Just a quick spar."

You shouldn't, a voice that sounded like Ranboo's reminded him. *You've already been out all night and you haven't eaten in hours.*

But who was he to back down from a challenge? The great TommyInnit was more than capable of defeating this kid.

He nodded once to Techno.

"Whenever you two are ready, then," the hero said, gesturing to the space they had atop the roof. Hopefully nobody in the building beneath them was a light sleeper. "Let's see how much

your apprentice has learned, Eret."

"I have full faith in him," was the confident response. "Do you in yours?"

Tommy quirked an eyebrow at Purpled as the two began to slowly circle each other, fists raised and on guard.

"Theseus is strong," Techno said. "I trust he'll do well."

Tommy's heart swelled at the words, and with that boost of confidence, he launched himself forward, swinging a quick fist at the other vigilante. Purpled was just as snappy in his retaliation, snapping up an arm to redirect the hit. Tommy reacted with another punch, and when this too was blocked, he let the momentum carry him into a spin and kicked out at the other's side.

Purpled caught the leg with both hands, the effort taking some air out of him but not enough. Tommy yelped as Purpled held his grip steady, yanking his leg up further and unsettling his balance. He caught himself just in time with his magic, before using it to propel himself forward and dragging Purpled — who still had his leg — with him. The boy stumbled, though tucked into a smooth roll and sprung up again, ready as ever.

"Nice magic," he said. "Wanna see mine?"

Tommy shrugged, rolling out his shoulders. It was embarrassing that his chest was already heaving; he really was running on no fuel, huh?

Purpled lunged at him, and Tommy just about gathered himself to dodge the blow. He let momentum carry him around again, summoning his magic to throw himself up this time and bring his fists down on Purpled's shoulders. His hands went right through the boy. Purpled faded away altogether as Tommy crashed against the ground, falling straight through him; when he glanced up again, the vigilante was several steps away, grinning wide.

"Cool, right?"

Tommy wasn't exactly sure what had happened. He pushed himself to his feet with haste, ignoring how his arms wobbled.

"Purpled's enhancement allows him to create very temporary clones of himself," Eret explained from the sidelines. "They keep his opponent occupied while he makes a quick getaway."

Tommy huffed through his nose. That certainly made things more difficult.

Purpled came at him running, and this time he didn't sidestep it, letting his magic flare as he met the boy head-on. He hit his chest with a fist strengthened by his enhancement, but the image of Purpled instantly dissipated. Before Tommy could get his bearings, a hard kick to the back of his knees toppled him.

"Missed me," Purpled quipped.

Tommy growled, gritting his teeth as he rolled aside before springing to his feet once more. He didn't hesitate to throw his magic at the vigilante this time; he hit one clone, two clones, three as Purpled kept running at him, and had to throw himself forward and beneath him as the other launched from above. Tommy whipped around, prepared for the fist that came swinging. He deflected it with his left arm, blasting his magic straight into Purpled's chest with the right. This time the hit landed.

Oh, if only he could talk back to the boy.

Purpled wasn't left incapacitated for long, already standing again as he shook off the blow like it was nothing. Tommy took a deep inhale as he initiated the fight this time, struggling to find the energy but determined to come out on top. He feigned a hit to Purpled's head, aiming a strike to the ribs instead; Purpled caught his fist as though he'd read Tommy's mind and pushed him right back. Tommy dropped to a crouch beneath the following high-kick, and let his magic boost himself upwards, knocking his head into Purpled's chin. Purpled stumbled back, though as he fired another ball of magic at the boy, a clone fizzled out in his place.

Tommy spun around immediately this time, ducking under the incoming punch and retaliating with one of his own. Purpled grunted as he braced against the hit. Tommy noticed it this time as the image of him stilled — a clone — and followed the vague flash to the right that was the real Purpled, stopping him in his tracks with another blast of red.

"You're fast," Purpled remarked, smirking as he gathered himself.

Tommy shrugged again; it was all he could do.

"Not fast enough."

He yelped as Purpled lashed out without hesitation, jumping backwards to avoid being hit. The sudden movement was dizzying unlike anything else he'd done that night. His magic flared around him like a shield as he fought off the light-headedness, though it wasn't enough; Purpled seized his opening the second the barriers fell, launching right at Tommy's back. Still unbalanced, Tommy toppled under the weight, falling flat on his chest and wincing as his chin hit the ground. Purpled rolled off of him, and he went to push himself up, keen to finish the fight, only to find he couldn't.

His arms couldn't even bear his own weight; they felt like noodles beneath him, weak and shaky. The feeling was quick to spread across his body as a whole the second his enhancement retreated, and he slumped on the rooftop, finally acknowledging how exhausted his body really was.

"You good, man?" Purpled's voice sounded from above him, a little more genuine than his dry quips while fighting. "Hope I didn't hit you too hard."

Tommy couldn't reply, so he didn't. He gave himself another few moments to catch his breath, before rolling onto his back. He could just about make out the stars, if he squinted. Or he really had hit his head too hard.

Techno's figure came into view as the man stood over him, quirking an eyebrow.

"Are you alright, kid?" he asked, offering a hand.

Tommy took it gratefully, letting the man pull him up. He didn't let go until he was sure he wasn't about to collapse again; he wasn't certain his legs would hold him up much longer.

"You seem a little unsteady there, Theseus," Techno murmured, while Eret and Purpled were out of earshot. "Are you injured?"

Tommy shook his head. "*I'm fine*," he assured the man.

Techno didn't seem convinced. Tommy waved him off, approaching Purpled where he stood conversing with Eret. The violet-clad vigilante glanced at him curiously, and then smiled.

"You're pretty strong, I'll give you that," he said. "Like I said, I'm more skilled. But it's not you, it's me."

Tommy nearly laughed at the deadpan statements. "*You just caught me on a bad day.*"

Purpled blinked, confused. "Um... yeah."

Tommy grinned to himself. He supposed there wasn't much worth in signing anything else when it wouldn't be understood, so instead he offered his hand for a friendly fist bump. Purpled seemed to recognise the gesture and relaxed, bumping Tommy's fist with his own.

"Maybe I'll see you again, yeah?" he said, glancing in questioning to the heroes.

Eret shrugged. "If Theseus is down for it, we could probably arrange another meeting or two."

Tommy nodded. He wasn't opposed to the idea; though that said, he would also rather have a rematch when he was actually in a state to be fighting.

Techno, somehow, seemed to pick up on this. "We'll give Theseus a while to catch up to your level, Purpled," he teased, eyes glimmering as he glanced sideways at Tommy.

Okay, that wasn't exactly how he would have phrased it. Tommy stared at Techno and hoped the blank expression of his mask conveyed how unimpressed he was with the remark.

"Course," Purpled agreed, and nodded to Tommy. "Nice meeting you."

Tommy nodded in response. He turned to Techno. *"It's late. I should probably go."*

Primes, the sooner he got into his bed the better. His body was aching.

Techno nodded in understanding, and gently clapped a hand over his shoulder. "Look after yourself."

"It was lovely to meet you," Eret added.

"You too," Tommy signed back. He nodded once more to Techno, letting the man's hand slip from his shoulder, and saluted the other two before dropping from the roof. He wasn't sure how he was going to find the energy to climb back up and retrieve his backpack, but he'd do it somehow.

It was all for Ranboo. Once this was sorted, he could look after himself too.

In the following days, Tommy's hunger and weakness only worsened. He spent more and more time sleeping, as much as he could with two districts to patrol; which, speaking of, was

becoming more and more difficult to keep up. He had nearly been knocked out cold one night in a fight he knew he should have won, and to say it was disheartening that he'd let someone go was a huge understatement. The only thing keeping him going was the promise he'd made to himself that he would make things better for him and Ranboo both.

And the emergency button was coming along really well, he had to admit. It was slower work than he'd thought, as Sam let him take the lead with its construction and simply guided him along. He was a little embarrassed to discover that had he gone to the tech shop in first, the payment would have been forwarded to the tower, but the materials he'd brought in still worked fine.

The biggest downside was, having given up lunchtimes to dedicate himself to the project, he was barely eating at all. He knew this hadn't escaped the notice of SBI either, when Phil had softly questioned him about it one morning upon hearing his stomach growl — but he was hardly about to admit the truth, and so he said nothing of it and pushed on.

It was just after six one night when he returned from the lab after a break hour spent alone trying to complete the button's coding. Phil and Techno were discussing the vigilante program in depth over the kitchen table; Wilbur was nursing a migraine on the living room couch.

Techno smiled as he spotted Tommy on his way back in, and waved him over.

"How's your project coming along?" Phil inquired, passing Tommy a glass of water as he seated himself at the table beside them.

Tommy shrugged, blinking away a brief dizziness. "Nearly finished, I hope," he replied.

"We were just discussing the training program," Techno chimed in, gesturing to the sheets of notes they had in front of them. "I was wondering about vigilantes who'd prefer to keep their identity."

Tommy's heart skipped a beat, and he met Techno's gaze steadily. The hero didn't blink.

Phil's wings shuffled against his back as he glanced down through their notes again. "It's... difficult," he admitted. "So many vigilantes want to keep their identities private for obvious reasons, but the council isn't exactly happy with letting them do so. And it complicates the pay and accommodation situation."

Tommy frowned, finally tearing his gaze from Techno's unwavering stare. He'd had a feeling there would be such issues, but it was surprising Techno seemed to be fighting for it.

He hardly... no, he wouldn't know. He couldn't.

"How is the accommodation going?" he decided to ask instead. He wasn't sure there was anything he had to offer towards their conundrum.

"Construction has started," Phil said with a nod. "Not sure when that'll finish, but before summer's end, I assume."

"Where are you housing them now then?" Tommy asked, curious.

"Purpled is staying on Eret's floor, actually, she said she didn't mind letting him stay," Techno explained. "There's one other vigilante, Michael, but he's staying at his own place still."

"Eret's mad," Wilbur spoke up from the couch, still holding his head in one hand. "No regard for their own safety."

Tommy frowned. "I'm sure Purpled's harmless," he said.

Wilbur scoffed. "You haven't even met him."

"Have you?" Techno challenged.

That shut Wilbur up.

"Why don't you look through the notes?" Phil suggested, pushing over a couple sheets to Tommy. "You always have good suggestions."

Tommy grinned at the praise, though the smile didn't last as he struggled to comprehend the words on the pages. His vision had doubled all of a sudden; each word swam and overlapped, letters colliding and impossible to make out. He shook his head to clear it, though the dizziness only worsened.

Techno and Phil had returned to their discussion in the meantime.

"—create fake identities for them?" Techno was suggesting, eyebrows furrowed in thought. "Give them names to use just for the sake of sorting out the pay and official paperwork."

Phil hummed in thought. "That might work," he admitted, "though there's still the issue of training and living in the tower — is it fair to have them masked the entire time?"

"Did you read the bit about that, Tommy?" Techno asked, nudging the boy's arm. "I had a couple thoughts, but I'm not sure."

Tommy hadn't managed to read anything. His stomach was aching empty, which he was suddenly aware of; his head felt like it was spinning atop his shoulders.

"Um — haven't gotten that far," he replied. His voice sounded strangely far away to his own ears.

"I hope you can read my writing okay," Phil remarked with a chuckle.

Tommy barely registered the words. He reached for the glass of water, barely feeling it against his fingers; as he pulled his arm back, the whole world tilted on its axis and his vision went dark. The glass slipped from a limp hand.

He was out before he hit the ground.

Chapter End Notes

sorry for the wait on this chapter!! i was on a trip with friends and had very little time to write, i hope the long word count makes up for it <333 very excited for what's to come with this fic!!

shoutout to kero for helping with purpled and also HUGE shoutout to mayx for all the help with this chapter, i am so grateful for you, everyone go show them some appreciation on [twitter](#) or [insta](#) <333

The Knots of Lies and Secrets

Chapter Summary

The longer Tommy keeps his secrets, the worse the tangle becomes. If he wants to stay afloat, some aspects of his life will need reevaluation.

TW// disordered eating, knife violence

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for [notes](#)

Tommy didn't dream. Or at least, he didn't think he did; a feminine voice was speaking to him from a distance far enough that he couldn't process the words, but he was sure it was real. He'd never been surer of anything.

He floated in the darkness for some time, body grasping the opportunity for rest. It was pleasantly peaceful, even his thoughts quiet as he simply listened to the voice. It seemed to reach out to him, drawing him in closer with an unspoken promise of safety and comfort. He continued to float.

"Tommy," it called, his name suddenly clear through the haze. *"Tommy!"*

"Tommy!"

All of a sudden, the voice was no longer so feminine at all.

Tommy whined as the darkness began to withdraw, taking its comfort with it. Multiple voices were speaking above him, and his awareness gradually returned to his body and limbs, a wave of pins and needles bringing his nerves back to life. His head pounded.

"Tommy!"

"Phil, you need to calm down—"

"He was — fucking — he just *dropped*," Phil gasped.

Tommy wanted to see, but his eyelids felt as though they'd been infused with lead. He was weak. He'd never been so weak, not for a long time. He shifted against the ground, the surface hard against his head and back; the world was still spinning, bringing the concern that he was going to fall over despite being flat on the floor.

"He's breathing, Phil, now you breathe."

Tommy recognised Techno's voice and groaned, his throat failing to produce words. Fingers brushed against his neck; another hand was in his hair. He couldn't recall what exactly had happened.

"He's gonna be okay." That was Wilbur. His voice wavered as he spoke, as though he wasn't sure who he was trying to convince.

Tommy attempted to push himself from the ground, but found all the strength in his body had been completely sapped. *Oh* — he hadn't been eating, had he? He couldn't actually remember when he'd last had food. That probably explained why he was on the floor.

"Tommy?"

"Dizzy," he replied, the words slurring on his heavy tongue.

Fingers carded gently through his hair, and he leaned into the warm touch. He managed to peel his eyes open just long enough to catch a glimpse of Wilbur's pale face overhead, and smiled weakly at the man. Reluctantly, the sentiment was returned.

"You're alright," Wilbur murmured.

"We need to get him off the floor," Phil spoke up again, evidently having caught his breath but no less worried. "Tech, will you...?"

Techno grunted in agreement, and two arms carefully slipped beneath Tommy's back and legs. He groaned at the movement, shutting his eyes tight again in attempt to beat off the nauseating sensation of spinning.

"Sorry, Tommy, just bear with me a second. Dunno when we last swept the floor," Techno joked lamely.

There wasn't much Tommy could do to oppose the action even if he wanted to. He felt rather like a ragdoll in Techno's arms, limp and drained of all energy. His head fell against the man's chest as he was lifted from the hard ground, and he let himself lean into the warmth of the hero's body, unable to support himself. He yearned to return to the comfort of the darkness — it had been so peaceful as he slept, his body desperate for the opportunity to rest and recover.

"He's so light," a voice whispered shakily. It sounded like Techno, which was odd, given that Tommy knew the Blade never let his voice waver.

He was set down on a much softer surface, and practically sank into the cushions beneath him. The hand was quick to return to his hair, rubbing rhythmic circles against his scalp, and he sighed into the soothing sensation. He had no idea who was behind it, but it felt nice.

"We need to check his blood sugars," someone else spoke up. "When was the last time he's eaten?"

"No idea," was the quiet reply. "He's been skipping meals to go to the lab."

A beat. "I'll go get the machine."

The fingers pulled away from his hair, much to his disliking. Tommy whined, and then vaguely registered the mention of checking his bloods; alarm bells were set off somewhere in the haze of his mind. He struggled to narrow down on why that was, headache worsening, and then it clicked. *Oh, right*. Because he was enhanced, but he'd lied about it, and blood tests would give away the presence of his powers to the people he'd spent all summer desperately hiding them from. Because that was the first step to an utter disaster. SBI weren't stupid — once they figured out that much, it wouldn't take long for them to crack the rest of the case. His heart tightened in his chest. He couldn't let that happen.

Tommy set his jaw, summoning all the willpower he possessed as he began to push himself up. Ultimately, it amounted to nothing; hands on his shoulders gently lay him back down again, and he knew it was a fight he couldn't win. He made a noise of complaint at the injustice of it.

"Stay down, kid," Techno murmured.

Tommy cracked his eyes open again, flitting between Phil and Techno in rapid succession. He had to stop them — and maybe, just maybe, on the off chance that Techno really *had* figured out the truth, and was okay with it, he would understand. The thought of having an ally through all of this was immensely relieving; but Tommy couldn't make assumptions. He still wasn't sure. Techno could still very well hate him when it all came to light.

When? If? Was it inevitable?

"Wil's gone to get the machine," Phil explained softly. "We'll check your sugars and go from there."

Tommy's chest seized up. He managed to get a grasp of Techno's wrist where it lay beside his hand, and shot the hybrid a look of urgency. " *Tech*— "

"We're just checking your sugars," Techno assured him, ever the mind-reader. His expression had softened remarkably. "Nothing else."

"Promise?"

"I promise."

Footsteps sounded somewhere to the left, though Tommy couldn't bring himself to glance over, slumping back into the couch. Wilbur had returned, entering Tommy's field of vision as he approached with what looked like a small needle.

"Just a quick pinch, Toms," he warned, and Tommy winced as his fingertip was pricked. It was over in an instant. "All done."

"When did you eat last?" Phil asked softly.

Tommy, for the life of him, had no clue. "I ate something... I think."

"Tech, grab a juice from the fridge," Wilbur called. He was frowning at the machine. "Some food too. Fruit, protein bars, something small."

Techno stood to do so without another word. Tommy watched him go, selfishly wishing he could stay even just for the moment he would be gone. Wilbur crouched down beside him, and the hand returned to his hair; so it was Wilbur who was gently scratching his scalp at every free moment. Tommy let his eyes flutter closed. He certainly wouldn't complain.

"How are you feeling now?"

Tommy's head was still spinning. "'M tired," he mumbled.

"Your blood sugars are low," Wilbur murmured. "Techno's gonna get you something to eat and drink, and that will help."

"You scared the shit out of me, mate," Phil admitted softly, wings pulled up tight behind him. He bit his lip as if unsure whether to continue. "You... wanna tell us what's going on?"

Tommy's heart dropped to his feet. What was he supposed to say? The truth? He'd been overworking himself and he knew that, but he hadn't really had any other options. He'd only done what he thought was best — though maybe sacrificing his health for this project hadn't been his smartest move.

To his gratitude, he didn't have to say anything as Techno returned, juice and snacks in hand. Wilbur helped prop Tommy up on a pillow, offering him the glass with a straw. SBI was quiet as he sipped at it, pretending as though they weren't watching him intently and failing miserably. Wilbur had pulled out his phone, and Phil picked at his nails while Techno stared at the floor.

The sugar gradually beat off the dizzy fog in his head, clearing his senses. He nibbled at a protein bar afterwards, and then, feeling more stable, scoffed down the apple slices and sandwich Techno had also provided. Energy gradually returned to him as he ate, and he relished in it.

Wilbur was the first to drop the act as soon as he noticed Tommy was finished eating. He set his phone aside, concerned gaze set on the boy as he leaned forward in his chair. Tommy could already feel the nerves stirring in his stomach.

"We need to talk."

There it was.

Phil and Techno perked up too, straightening in their seats as they let the worry in their expressions truly shine through. Tommy could barely stand it.

"About what?" he asked innocently, sipping at the remainder of his juice.

Wilbur raised an eyebrow. "You passed out in our kitchen, Tommy. And don't think we haven't noticed you skipping mealtimes. You've gotta be famished."

Tommy set his juice aside and dropped his gaze to his hands, pulling nervously at his sleeves. "I've just been busy," he mumbled. "I guess I forgot to eat."

"How long have you been forgetting to eat?" Phil asked softly. "We've known for a while, mate, but I was hoping you'd come to us first."

Tommy swallowed a bitter taste in his throat. "A couple weeks," he admitted.

Phil sucked in a breath. Wilbur's forehead creased even further as his eyebrows pressed together.

"Is there anything that prompted this?" he asked, almost reluctantly.

Tommy's throat tightened. He could trust them. He *wanted* to trust them. He was just... so fucking tired of lying. "My roommate lost his job."

SBI were quiet for an uncomfortably long moment, and Tommy shifted uneasily in his spot on the couch. When he finally dared to look up, he was caught off guard by the expression of utter dismay in the three's faces. Phil's wings sagged behind him.

"You're not saying.... Can't you afford food?" he asked softly.

Tommy swallowed hard, glancing away. Well, there was no going back now. This was what truth felt like, he supposed. "It's... difficult, I guess."

"Primes, Tommy," Wilbur breathed. "And you didn't say anything?"

"What was there to say?" Tommy half-joked. "I can just about manage the rent and bills on my own, but everything else on top of that...."

"He makes you pay the rent? And the bills?!" Wilbur exclaimed, horrified. "You're *sixteen!*"

And he's only seventeen, but that's yet another lie I've told you. "I mean, he doesn't have a job right now, so it's not like he has a choice."

"That shouldn't — he's the adult, you shouldn't even be working in the first place, Primes," Wilbur argued, shaking his head.

"Well, as you can now tell, we're dirt poor," Tommy mumbled.

"I'm going to raise your pay," Phil cut in.

The statement nearly gave Tommy whiplash as he snapped his head back to stare at the man in disbelief.

"That's — I — you don't have to, really—"

"No, I will," Phil said with certainty. "Primes, I should have a long time ago."

"I thought the tower didn't allow a higher salary for assistants," Techno piped up, glancing curiously at Phil.

"They don't," Phil affirmed. "I'll pay him out of my own pocket."

Tommy's eyes must have been comparable to golf balls as he stared in shock at the hero. "I — seriously, it's fine—"

"Fuck, it's not fine, Tommy," Wilbur snapped, irritation pinching his features. "Your roommate — how did he lose his job?"

Tommy bit his cheek. "I don't really see how that matters."

"It matters," Phil agreed, and *of course* he was taking Wilbur's side on this. "He shouldn't have put you in this situation in the first place."

Tommy wanted to scream. They didn't even know Ranboo; they didn't know how hard he was working to find another job, how every struggle they faced they dealt with together, how difficult it had been on *both* of them. They didn't have a fucking clue, but they threw assumptions left right and centre.

Was that his fault? For the lies?

The thought nearly made him recoil. Was he the reason for the distrust towards each other from both ends of SBI and Ranboo? Fuck, he was really the reason for... *everything*. The lies, the excuses, all of it.

But he'd be damned if he let Ranboo take the fall.

"It's *not* his fault," he insisted, emphasising how sure he was in his words. "Really, their excuse for firing him was unbelievable. Violence towards coworkers — like, *seriously*—"

He cut himself off immediately upon registering the genuine horror in the heroes' faces. Ah. They believed it.

Nothing good ever came from the truth, apparently.

"Violence towards coworkers?" Wilbur echoed, shocked.

"Well, they fucking lied, obviously!" Tommy shouted, pushing himself further up in his seat as frustration began to boil. Techno moved to stop him, but he shrugged him off. "I can't believe — you really think he'd do that?"

"Maybe he would!" Wilbur shot back, expression hardening. "He doesn't seem to have an issue with laying a hand on you!"

"Wilbur," Techno cut in sharply, but Tommy was quicker, hot fury surging under his skin.

"What the fuck is wrong with you?! He's a good person, he hasn't done anything!"

"Mate, you must realise how this looks from an outsider perspective," Phil said quietly.

Tommy whirled on him, stunned. "We're not seriously having this conversation again, are we?"

"You come home nearly every day with another bruise or injury," Wilbur added, eyes narrowed. "And now you're passing out because he can't afford to feed you, and he's been accused of violence towards coworkers?"

"I'm not being fucking abused!" Tommy snapped, outraged.

"Well clearly you're lying about *something*, because you're not fucking okay!" Wilbur retorted, his anger rising to meet Tommy's own.

Tommy flinched back, eyes widening.

"Wil—" Techno tried again, to no avail.

Close call or not, Tommy wasn't about to let that be the end of the argument. They didn't *understand*. "I didn't ask you to worry so much."

"Primes forbid we do!" Wilbur shouted. "You *matter* to us, fuck! You're not even trying to take care of yourself!"

"I don't need your help!"

"Because *clearly* you're doing just fine all on your own."

Tommy bristled at the sarcasm. "I'm just your fucking assistant, why is it so important to you?!"

" *You're* important to me!" Wilbur snapped, jaw tense, and then took a moment to sit back, sighing. "I just.... You're more than an assistant to us, Tommy. You're a... you're a friend."

Phil eyed the two warily as the tense atmosphere seemed to gradually relax. His wings shifted as he glanced at Tommy, offering a weak smile. "It's as Wil said, Tommy. We care about you."

Tommy finally deflated, shoulders slumping as the words hit their mark. "Then... trust me. Please."

Wilbur's expression fell flat. "I feel like we're going in circles here."

Tommy shot him a glare. After that reply, he was inclined to agree. "So you don't trust me."

"Well clearly you don't trust us," Wilbur argued, though something akin to guilt shone through in his expression for just a moment.

Anger rippled through Tommy's chest, a fiery heat against his ribs. Fuck, no matter how hard he tried, they were never going to see eye-to-eye, were they? He was never going to be able to fully be himself with them. He'd thought they'd made progress, but it constantly felt like he was back at square one.

"Maybe I can't," he spat, a venom to his tone he hadn't quite intended to come out.

"Tommy," Phil spoke gently, but Tommy wasn't in a listening mood anymore.

He swung his feet off the couch to the ground, ignoring the avid complaints from the heroes as he stood shakily. The world swayed for a moment, but it passed, and he made his way towards the elevator with newfound determination.

"Tommy!" That was Techno calling after him. "You should really stay lying down—"

"Don't feel like it," Tommy snapped, ignoring the pang of guilt that accompanied using that tone of voice against Techno.

"You could spend the night again," Phil suggested, a growing desperation in his words as he hurried after his assistant. "We'd be able to keep an eye on you—"

The thought of staying right then made Tommy feel physically ill. "I'm going home."

"Right now?" Wilbur asked, alarmed as Tommy entered the elevator alone. "Wait, hang on —"

"See you tomorrow," Tommy mumbled, and pressed the button to close the doors.

He slumped against the wall as soon as he was out of sight, exhaustion weighing down his entire body. He would rest at home, he promised himself; but he couldn't stay. He couldn't stay another minute.

Primes, they would never understand, would they? And it was his fault. All the lies, all the secrets, his complete lack of honesty and genuineness had created invisible walls between them that were impossible to overcome. It shouldn't have been so devastating; he'd been prepared for this when he applied for the job. He'd known what he was getting himself into. Yet... circumstances had changed somewhat, and he hadn't been prepared for their genuine care for him.

Hadn't been prepared for being considered a friend.

His throat tightened uncomfortably as the elevator opened again and he hurried past reception, not looking anyone in the eye. It had been months since he'd taken the train home but he at least could recall the path back to the station, even if it made his heart pang to return to his apartment alone.

But he didn't want to see Wilbur right now. For whatever reason — and it was probably, again, his fault — the hero wouldn't fucking let go of the ridiculous idea that Ranboo would dare hurt him or *anyone*. The thought of his roommate being accused of such a thing was nauseating. Ranboo was the softest and kindest person he knew; he was literally incapable of harming anyone else, and having to see him struggle so much with the loss of his previous job and then hear Wilbur throw such claims around was infuriating.

Yet he wouldn't even hear Tommy out that he was completely fucking wrong. He was so sure he was right, without having a clue about Tommy or Ranboo or their life.

There was no trust between them. And as long as he kept up his secrets and lies, there never would be.

Something crumbled inside him at the realisation, leaving his chest hollow.

It was raining heavily outside as Tommy made his way to the underground station, the clouds leaving the city dark and dim. He didn't even have a hood to put up, his soaked hair already dripping onto his face. It was cold without the sun's warmth.

The buildings around him were oddly unfamiliar, still immaculately clean and a show of the district's wealth, but not ones he recalled seeing on his old daily trek. He paused, glancing around the empty street. He must have taken a wrong turn.

Ahead, a figure rounded the corner headed his way, hood pulled up over their head to keep back the rain. Tommy approached them reluctantly, not sure what else to do.

"Um, excuse me?" he asked, stumbling to a stop as he realised how tall the figure actually was. "Do you know how to get to the underground from here?"

They lifted their head, a sharp, toothy grin coming into the light. "You lost?"

Suddenly, this wasn't feeling like his best idea anymore. Tommy took a breath, a warmth gathering in his chest as his magic rose protectively.

"Yeah, a little."

The stranger's grin widened even further. "You got anything to pay for it?"

Tommy blinked. "I hope you're not mugging me."

"Are you *complaining* about it?"

"At seven o'clock in the evening? In *first*? Fuck yeah, I'm gonna complain."

They shrugged. "Sucks for you," they said, and then made a grab for his wrist.

Tommy retaliated quickly, a burst of his magic hitting the other right in the chest. They were stronger than they looked; they took the hit with little more than a stumble, grin dropping into a dangerous scowl.

The hum of an approaching car engine caught Tommy's attention, and he began to back towards it, hoping the stranger would fuck off if there was threat of being seen. But then—

"Tommy! Tommy, are you out here?!"

Tommy whirled around in surprise. Fuck, was that — had SBI come after him? He had not been expecting that.

Nor had he been expecting a strong arm to wrap around him from behind, dragging him frantically back towards the alley they'd come from. Cold panic shocked Tommy's system as he fought desperately against his attacker's grip, using his magic suddenly out of the question with SBI on the scene. His struggle was completely in vain, adrenaline doing little to combat his own exhaustion.

"Help!" he shouted, as loud as he could manage. "Hel—"

A hand smothered his mouth, muffling his cries, and he bit down on it hard. The person behind him swore, the hand retreating, though it was quickly replaced by something sharp and cold at his throat.

"I suggest you stay still, and shut up," a harsh voice spat into his ear.

Tommy swallowed, the action inadvertently pressing against the knife on his neck. Something warm beaded against the point of pain. This person wasn't fucking around.

"Tommy!" The calls were coming closer. Rapid footsteps were quick to follow.

Tommy froze as Wilbur and Techno arrived at the end of the alleyway, matching terror dawning in their faces as they took in the situation. Techno was the first to school his expression, jaw tightening and shoulders drawing up. They were professional heroes, after all; this was nothing compared to their usual business.

"Another step closer and I'll kill him," threatened the voice behind Tommy, their breath warming his ear. He winced, repulsed by the closeness.

"I think it's in your best interest to let him go," Wilbur said coldly, fists curling at his sides. "Then I might consider sending you to prison, and not a graveyard."

"Is that a risk you want to take, Ghostbur?"

The blade cut further into Tommy's neck, and his breath hitched. He met Wilbur's gaze, hoping his expression conveyed how dire the situation really was. One step wrong, and he might not actually be escaping alive. His stomach knotted at the thought.

No. They were heroes; they would save him. They had to.

Techno caught his eye then, and Tommy watched him curiously as he brought his hands to his eyes and made a subtle pinching motion. Tommy froze. That was sign language — *close your eyes*.

With a shallow inhale and no further questions, Tommy obeyed.

Several things seemed to happen all at once.

Even through his shut eyelids, Tommy was blinded by the flash of light, head reeling from the sudden brightness of it. He was thrown around by several pairs of arms, the absence of

the knife at his throat a relief but the concern of not knowing what was going on still twisting his insides. There was shouting and scuffling, the flap of wings and the gusts of air that followed — *"get the fuck away from my kid!"* — was that Phil? And finally Tommy was held up by arms gentle but secure enough to find his bearings.

"I've got you," Wilbur murmured, one hand sliding up to rest in Tommy's hair.

Tommy blinked his eyes open, peering over Wilbur's shoulder just in time to catch Techno swinging his fist right into his attacker's face. It was lights out for the hooded stranger as they dropped to the ground; but that wasn't quite what had caught his eye.

Phil was in the air, several feet above the ground; his wings were spread wide, an impossibly dark midnight against the already grim back lighting of the stormy sky. Most shocking were his eyes, positively glowing with a light that challenged that of the sun's. Tommy had never seen the Angel of Death up so close, but that was undoubtedly who he was seeing in action now.

"What the fuck just happened?" he asked, voice muffled by Wilbur's shoulder.

Wilbur stepped back enough to put distance between them, though didn't let go of the boy. His expression was tight as he examined Tommy's neck, a careful hand thumbing away the blood that had beaded there.

"Are you okay?" he asked, voice quiet but tense and serious.

"Yeah," Tommy replied, still stretching to see Phil and Techno. "What just happened?"

Wilbur didn't reply, just pulling Tommy into another embrace. Tommy didn't complain, realising his legs were a little shakier than he'd thought as he melted into the warmth. Fuck if today hadn't been the weirdest evening of his life, but in that moment he was only grateful for the shoulder to lean on.

A friend.

"I'm sorry," Wilbur whispered regretfully. "I was a prick."

"Yeah," Tommy agreed. "You were."

"Tommy," came Techno's gruff voice, and Tommy stiffened as the hybrid approached. "You good?"

It suddenly hit him that Techno had signed to him. That he'd shown him that he understood. That Techno seemed to have *known* he would understand, despite the fact that only Theseus knew sign language, and Tommy had previously insisted he didn't.

Something akin to the weight of a bowling ball sank deep into his stomach. So Techno knew.

Did he? Was this confirmation? It felt like it.

Tommy met Techno's gaze, muscles frozen. What did this even mean for them? He could barely bring himself to nod in response to the question. Techno didn't look away.

Phil came over then, feet on the ground but wings still flared and eyes still shining with the intensity of all the stars in the sky.

"Your eyes," Tommy croaked, barely able to look the man in the face.

Phil's expression softened, though lines were still drawn in his forehead as he kept his guard up. "I used my magic to blind that guy. It'll fade in a few minutes."

"Blind?" Tommy echoed, eyes widening. "Like, permanently?"

"Oh, no," Phil chuckled, folding his wings. Even with his relaxed posture and casual clothes, he was an otherworldly presence beside them; Tommy could practically *feel* the power buzzing in the hero's veins as his own magic responded with a soft hum. He quenched it. "I probably did some damage, but nothing life-altering."

"You said it was tiring before," Tommy pointed out, unable to squash his worry. "Using your magic."

"Nothing I can't handle," Phil replied, and then stepped closer, laying a careful hand on Tommy's shoulder. "Are you alright, mate?"

Tommy took a breath. Considering he'd just stared death in the face and came out almost unscathed, he'd definitely been worse. "Yeah, I'm fine."

"Are you sure?" Phil pressed, and fuck if meeting the man's gaze didn't feel like staring into heaven.

"Yes," Tommy said firmly.

Phil nodded, appeased by the answer. "Sorry, mate, we won't push anymore." He glanced at Techno and Wilbur in turn, before looking back to Tommy. "We won't push about *anything*. It was unfair on you. I'm sorry."

Three top heroes genuinely apologising to him, one still holding him steady in his arms after driving out to find him in the rain — Primes, sometimes his life didn't feel real.

"It's alright," he mumbled. "Sorry for worrying you."

"It's not your fault these two are mother hens," Techno joked lightly, earning him two unimpressed glances from his teammates.

"We just... we do worry, mate. You mean a lot to all of us, and if there is ever anything we can do for you, or that you just need to talk about... please, let us know," Phil said softly, and gave his shoulder a squeeze. "We just want you to be alright."

"I am alright," Tommy said, smiling weakly at him. "Absolutely pogchamp right now."

Phil returned the small smile. "I'll pretend I know what that means."

He joined the hug then, and Techno was right after him, the three wrapping around Tommy a comfort he'd never experienced before. He simply let his eyes shut and sighed into the contact, not sure who to embrace in return. He was safe now. Everything was okay.

Phil pulled back all too soon. "I'm gonna take them to the police station," he said, nodding over his shoulder to the unconscious body on the ground. "I'll meet you back at Tommy's?"

Tommy stepped back from Wilbur to meet his gaze; the man was very reluctant to let go. "We're going to mine?" he asked, confused.

Wilbur rolled his eyes. "As if I'd let you continue walking home after that," he said dryly. "Yes, we're driving you home. And we'll get groceries on the way."

Tommy blinked. "I can't—"

"We're paying," Techno assured him with a smile. "Though you'll be able to afford them on your own anyway with a higher salary."

Tommy's cheeks flushed at the mention of it. It felt like accepting pity money, in a way; it was embarrassing they felt obliged to do so much for him. "You really don't have to—"

"I promise there's no talking me out of it," Phil said with a grin. He stepped back, heading towards the body. "See you soon."

Wilbur nodded. He and Techno led Tommy back to the car where it had been terribly parked in a clear rush, and immediately began hunting through the glovebox for plasters to cover his neck. Tommy sat himself in the middle of the wide back seat, watching in amusement and mortification.

"It's just a scratch," he whined, "I seriously don't think it needs to be bandaged."

"Oh, shut up and let me take care of you," Wilbur argued, leaning back to apply the plasters carefully.

"They're Philza ones, if that helps," Techno pointed out cheerfully, and it was then Tommy noticed their green colouring and little winged design. He wasn't sure if that made it better or worse.

They drove to the grocery store after that, a huge, shining shop in first that was even more spacious and clean indoors than it looked from outside. Tommy stuck right with Techno and Wilbur to ensure he didn't get lost, though that didn't stop him from dragging them down every single aisle to investigate the broad variety of food items available. Most interesting to him was the fact that the shop had a decently sized clothing section in addition to all the food; as well as an entire shelf dedicated just to crocs.

"We all have to get matching ones," he insisted, as Wilbur eyed the shelving with an expression that seemed to yearn for death. "Look, look — red for me, yellow for you, Wil, pink for Techno, and we can get green and purple for Phil and Ranboo too!"

Techno shrugged, merely picking out the colours Tommy had requested and adding the shoes to the cart. Wilbur squinted at the hybrid, and then at Tommy.

"Why?" he asked, exasperated. "And Ranboo? Your *dog*?"

Oh, right. Tommy had forgotten about that. Was he going to roll with it? Absolutely. "Are you implying we should leave him out of the croc club?"

Wilbur took a long inhale, pinching the bridge of his nose as he contemplated all prior life choices. "No," he sighed wearily, "I guess it would be rude not to include him."

"What size is he?" Techno asked.

Tommy shrugged. "Dunno, get big ones."

The utter bewilderment that had settled in Wilbur's expression was worth every second of it. Tommy grinned, and they continued making their way around the shop. Wilbur and Techno had the shopping cart packed to the brim with food by the time they approached the till; Tommy wasn't sure he actually had the space to store it all in his apartment, nevermind the knowledge to cook things. He usually relied on premade meals or packages that came with instructions on the back. Loose vegetables and packs of various meats? What did you even do with that?

Regardless, it had all been bagged and stuffed into the trunk of the car before either of the heroes spared him an ear to listen to his complaints. Once they were on the road again, there was no point in arguing any further, so he simply sat back and let the two chat over music.

His phone buzzed in his pocket, and he pulled it out to see a text from Ranboo.

Got a last minute interview, probably gonna be gone an hour or two.

Tommy smiled warmly at the screen, quickly typing out a response. Thank Prime they both kept a set of keys on them to the apartment.

Good luck Ranboob youve got this big man

It was still a little nerve-racking, letting Techno and Wilbur into his home for the first time. There was a reason he'd been so adamant about not letting them see it; the state of it was a clear giveaway of the wealth, or rather, lack thereof, that Tommy and his roommate possessed. The small rooms were mostly bare with the exception of their secondhand furniture, and there was dirt and grime living so deep in the corners of the walls and tiles that they couldn't clean it if they tried. Their lack of belongings was just another giveaway that they were poor.

To his utmost gratitude, neither of the heroes spoke a word against the place as he opened the door, only exchanging a quick glance.

"Sorry fellas, I wasn't expecting visitors today," Tommy joked lamely, and pushed in their one chair to the table. "Haven't really cleaned up."

"Where's your roommate?" Wilbur didn't hesitate to question him.

Tommy sighed. "Out, at the minute."

"This is your apartment?" Techno asked, expression unreadable. "All of it?"

Tommy swallowed. "Well, y'know, there's a bedroom and bathroom. But yeah, that's it."

Wilbur set down the two bags he was carrying on the table, immediately moving to investigate said rooms. Tommy hurried after him anxiously, though was unable to stop the man before he had opened the door.

"Wil — you don't have to—"

Wilbur was silent as he took in the state of their tiny bedroom, forehead creased in concern. Tommy knew it must have looked miserable in comparison to the lavish room Wilbur alone probably slept in; there was nothing but their single mattress and the blankets atop it, their boxy television on the ground, and a pile of clothes in the corner. Tommy's suit lay at the

bottom of it, just out of sight, as he was uncomfortably aware of. However grim their apartment as a whole was, the bedroom was the most bleak.

"You sleep on just this?" Wilbur asked softly, meeting Tommy's gaze.

Tommy looked away. "...Yeah."

"And your roommate?"

"We share," Tommy replied quietly, and caught the way Wilbur's expression immediately hardened. "I mean, we take turns. Y'know."

The hero's eyes widened considerably. "Take turns — what, with the floor?"

Tommy blinked. "Yeah? Like, we have blankets."

Wilbur stared at him, face falling. His voice was soft when he next spoke. "Oh, Tommy...."

"Hey man, beds are fuckin' expensive," Tommy mumbled. He went to shut the door, eager to return to the kitchen, but something had caught Wilbur's eye and he stepped further in. For a moment, Tommy's heart stopped.

"Your blankets," Wilbur murmured, and Tommy followed his gaze, quickly realising what he had seen. The edges of their bedsheets were stained with blue. "Ghostbur's been here."

Yeah, there wasn't really any denying it. Wilbur knew the signs left from his subconscious being better than anyone.

"Yeah," Tommy admitted, rubbing at his cheek absentmindedly where he knew another blue mark currently resided. "He, uh, he stops by."

Wilbur's brow furrowed. "I don't remember that."

Tommy's heart skipped a beat. "That's odd," he remarked, urging Wilbur out of the room. "Um, we should help Techno unpack—"

"We've got it," another voice chimed merrily, and Tommy and Wilbur turned around to see Phil in the kitchen, putting away the last of the food. His eyes had returned to their normal pale blue.

"Ranboo's gonna freak out," Tommy noted, staring in awe at their open cupboards. "I don't think the kitchen has ever been this full."

"Yeah, your poor dog," Wilbur said sarcastically, and Tommy shot him a grin.

"He's very real. Just on a walk right now."

"I'm sure."

"I guess that's it then," Techno said, interrupting the pair. "We'll get out of your hair, Tommy."

Tommy couldn't blame him for wanting to leave; their little kitchen had never been so cramped. Phil's wings made up for an entire other person with the space they occupied.

"I'm buying you a bed next," Wilbur said seriously. "And then some wall decorations or a plant or something. No offense, but this place is bleak."

"None taken," Tommy replied.

Techno nodded to him, and then nudged Wilbur, gesturing to the door. If Tommy's heart sank a little at them leaving so soon, he wouldn't admit it. His only comfort was that he didn't have to worry too much about them discovering the suit, or anything else that might give something away.

"Are you coming in tomorrow?" Wilbur asked him. "No pressure, of course, you could probably use a day off."

Tommy grinned at him. "Yeah, I'll be in."

Wilbur smiled. "See you in the morning, then. Rest well."

"Take care, Tommy," Techno added, and the look he shot at him emphasised that he meant it.

"Will do," Tommy said. He went to wave at the two, but then decided against it, stepping forward to pull the pair into a swift hug instead and ignoring the way his ears burned as they returned the embrace with equal enthusiasm. He pulled back after a second, face warm. "Bye then."

"Phil?" Techno questioned, glancing at the man curiously.

"You two head on out, I'll only be a minute," Phil replied, waving them off.

Techno and Wilbur exchanged a glance but nodded, waving to Tommy as they left through the door. Tommy bit his cheek nervously as he watched them go; his mind was shuffling through a thousand different reasons why Phil wanted to speak to him alone.

Phil's wings shifted against his back. "I just wanted to—" He cut himself off, gaze dropping to Tommy's neck. "Oh, those fuckers. Did they put my plasters on you?"

Tommy's face flushed crimson. "It was all their decision, I had nothing to do with it."

"Don't like them?" Phil teased.

"No!" Tommy argued, positively mortified. "I mean — it's just—"

"I'm just messing, Tommy, sorry," Phil laughed, giving him a friendly nudge. "Alright. I wanted to give you this, actually."

Tommy watched curiously as the man reached into his pocket, producing a box small enough to sit in his palm. A jewellery box, he realised; though that only brought further confusion.

Phil opened the box, watching Tommy's reaction intently. There was a necklace inside; a shining green gem on a simple golden chain, small but charming. It seemed familiar, somehow, but Tommy wasn't sure from where.

"Each of us in SBI has one," Phil explained. "Techno and I have earrings, and Wil keeps his on a bracelet."

That's where Tommy had seen it. Even now, he could catch the emerald glimmering behind strands of blond hair on Phil's ear. He had figured that it was some sort of sentimental item to the three heroes; but having one of his own offered to him now, it was either a more casual piece of jewellery than he'd thought, or....

"We've all agreed you should have one too," Phil continued with a smile. "You're as much a part of SBI as we are at this point."

Oh. Or that.

Tommy's heart swelled with sudden emotion at the words, and he had to take a minute to compose himself. "I'm not even a hero," he said quietly.

"Since when was that a requirement?" Phil chuckled. "Listen mate, I know we've said it to you plenty today, but I thought there was never a better time to give you this so you know that we mean it. We really do care about you."

"Oh," Tommy breathed. He wasn't sure words could do justice to the bright warmth bubbling in his chest. Phil pushed the box into his hands.

"You don't have to take it, of course, but it's there if you'd like," Phil said warmly. "You matter a great deal to us, Tommy, and I just want you to know that you can trust us with anything. We'll always be here for you, no matter what."

Tommy could have cried. They really had no idea, and still said such words to him without realising what they truly meant. Could he trust them? He didn't know anymore. He wasn't sure of anything anymore.

Unable to come up with a strong enough expression of gratitude, Tommy simply threw himself at the man, burying himself into his shoulder as arms and wings wrapped around him. Guilt plagued his head as he allowed himself the embrace, as he allowed himself any comfort with Phil or any of SBI while he was so constantly dishonest with them. He didn't deserve their kindness, didn't deserve the faith they put in him. Yet they gave it anyway, gave it constantly, gave it without knowing his truth.

"Thank you," he whispered.

"Are you sure you're okay?" Phil asked softly.

Tommy wasn't sure what he was referring to. After earlier? After everything? Perhaps both.

"I don't know," he said honestly, the confession relieving. "But I think I will be. I've got you three."

Phil pulled away, smiling brightly at him. His hands lingered for a second, before he gave his shoulder a pat and stepped towards the door. "I'm glad."

"Me too," Tommy agreed. He couldn't help a small laugh at the situation. "Wasn't expecting sappy shit tonight."

Phil laughed with him. "I won't let Wil or Techno know."

"Thank fuck," Tommy said with a grin. "I'd never hear the end of it."

Phil returned the broad smile as he headed out the door. Tommy followed him, supposing it was only polite to see him out. The exhaustion was really starting to catch up with him now, and he had to stifle a yawn.

"Goodnight, Tommy," Phil said.

Tommy nodded. "Night, Dad."

He froze.

Phil, too, seemed surprised by the remark, though delight was quick to spread across his expression as his eyes lit up and smile grew again.

Tommy could barely find words. "I did not — that wasn't — what—"

"It's alright, mate—"

"Fuck off, get out of my house," Tommy stammered, and slammed the door. He could hear Phil's laughter through the thin wood, and his entire face grew uncomfortably warm. That couldn't have just happened. It had been a trick of the light — er, his imagination. TommyInnit never made mistakes. TommyInnit did *not* see his employer as a father figure.

TommyInnit had a lot of reflection to do on his relationships with SBI, and what the fuck he was going to do about all the lies and secrets that twisted everything into knots.

Chapter End Notes

i SPEEDRAN this and it is SO LONG 7.2K WORDS POG

crocinnit is finally here can u let me out of the basement now discord pls i gave u what u wanted

[my twitter!](#) // [the discord!](#)

Failure

Chapter Summary

The city holds its breath, and Tommy is faced with his biggest challenge to date.

TW// descriptions of injury/violence, implied panic attack, mentions of fire, bombs

after the first 1.6k words this chapter is a slightly heavier one, please mind yourselves everyone! i'll leave a summary in the end notes for those of you who can't read it <3

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for [notes](#)

When Ranboo returned home that night, it was to — for the first time in weeks — a warm, full meal that Tommy had just finished figuring out how to cook. Tommy had never been happier to offer his roommate a plate full of food and see his face light up as he walked through the door. With Tommy's raise, and the emergency button that was well on its way to completion too, things were looking up for the pair. Most importantly to Tommy, things were looking up for Ranboo.

The good news of Tommy's increased pay and the groceries SBI had stopped by to deliver had certainly lifted some of the weariness from under Ranboo's eyes. In addition to that, the interview he had returned from hadn't gone badly at all; he hadn't gotten the job yet, but he'd been invited back for a training day and subsequent final interview.

They were going to be okay. And to Tommy's great surprise, it seemed to be confessing some truth to SBI and letting them help that had kicked off their good streak of luck.

Tommy didn't patrol that night; it was probably in his best interest not to, given his earlier passing out and body still recovering from the lack of food. Ghostbur visited a little earlier than usual too, and Tommy had a feeling that meant Wilbur was checking up on them. He didn't really mind. It was nice to be awake to speak with Ghostbur for a while, anyway.

"Oh, hello Tommy!" the ghostly figure had greeted them cheerfully as he floated through their front door. Tommy had told him he could just phase through whatever surface he

wanted, given nothing was really going to stop him anyway, but Ghostbur insisted it was more polite. "Hello, Ranboo!"

The boys were seated on the mattress in their room, and glanced up through the doorway to the kitchen as they noted the ghost's appearance. Tommy beamed at Ghostbur; Ranboo offered him a small smile.

"Hello, Ghostbur," Ranboo said politely. "You're... early."

"Wilbur was worried," Ghostbur replied happily, entering the room. Tommy snorted; Wilbur would not be impressed at how casually his subconscious snitched on his emotions. "He managed to sleep earlier so I could check on you. Tommy told you he stopped by?"

"With Philza and the Blade, yes," Ranboo answered, glancing at Tommy.

Tommy was playing with the emerald charm that lay against his chest, a fond smile on his face. "You can tell Wil he doesn't have much to worry about. We're doing fine now."

Ghostbur brightened considerably. " *Can* I tell him?"

Tommy blinked. "I mean, just that, yeah."

"Because he does *know* now," Ghostbur continued pointedly, "that I've been visiting. There's no point still hiding it, right? He's quite frustrated with me. He hasn't even met Ranboo."

Tommy felt a tinge of guilt as he exchanged a quick glance with Ranboo. "I'd rather you didn't, still," he admitted reluctantly. "Sorry."

Ghostbur's smile faltered. "That's okay," he said. He paused. "But why?"

"The — um — the surprise party," Tommy replied, hoping that was the excuse he had used before. "I just don't want to spoil anything."

Ghostbur pursed his lips. "But Wilbur has seen the apartment now. Does that not spoil it?"

Tommy swallowed nervously, mouth opening and closing as he struggled for words.

Ranboo stepped in hastily. "Redecorating, our plans, there's a couple things he might see through you. Because you're here more often, right? It's just to be safe."

Ghostbur took a moment to think on this point, and Tommy shot a grateful look at Ranboo. His roommate met his gaze, an unspoken but obvious "*you're shit at lying*" clear in his eyes.

"I suppose," Ghostbur finally agreed, and smiled again. "I trust you."

The pang of guilt made a swift return in Tommy's gut. "Yeah," he said softly. "You too."

"You don't have to lie," Ghostbur replied cheerily. "Wilbur doesn't think you trust us."

Tommy blinked, caught off guard. "I do," he argued. The words felt weak on his tongue. "Man's gotta have *some* privacy, though."

"Wilbur and I tell each other everything," Ghostbur mused. "We don't usually have a choice."

"Sorry about that," Ranboo said softly.

"It's okay!" Ghostbur cheered. "We *are* the same person."

"But also not," Tommy said.

"But also not," Ghostbur agreed. "If there's anything I can do to help you, Tommy, just say the word!"

Tommy wasn't sure there was anything Ghostbur could do that would change anything for the better. He was already asking too much of him, all to ensure his identity remained hidden. Anything more would only be selfish.

"You just being here is enough," he said after a moment, smiling at the man. "Being our friend."

Ghostbur's smile shone bright at that. "Of course! I love being your friend."

He darted forward fast enough to startle Tommy had the boy not been prepared. But Tommy was well used to Ghostbur's fond touches at this point, and only smiled as he pressed an affectionate kiss to his forehead, strands of hair catching in the blue stain. Ghostbur retreated as quickly as he'd approached, and offered Ranboo a more casual high-five.

"Will you ever let them fade?" Tommy asked with a laugh of mock exasperation, gently brushing his fingertips against the new mark.

Ghostbur grinned wide. "Never. Do you wanna play Uno? I brought cards."

Tommy and Ranboo exchanged an amused glance.

"Sure," Ranboo replied.

The evening passed peacefully. It wasn't long after that day that Wilbur brought the promised bed to the apartment; he arrived earlier than usual one morning dragging a huge cardboard box up the stairs with a bright smile. Tommy had barely been awake, and frantically hid his

suit under a pile of clothes that he had meant to take to the laundrette before opening the door. The bed didn't take too long to assemble, though the pair was still late to work by the time they had finished bickering over Wilbur's choice of bed fit for a sixteen-year-old.

"This is literally Lightning McQueen," Tommy stated, staring at the bright red bed frame.

He hadn't really noticed anything other than the colour until it had been fully assembled, but now with the clear cartoon design of wheels, headlights and eyes, it was obvious that it was more than a simple red bed. It was also far smaller than Tommy had been expecting — and sure, beggars can't be choosers, but it was literally a child's bed.

"Yes," Wilbur agreed, deadpan. "From the hit movie Cars."

"Yeah, I know," Tommy replied. He glanced sideways at the hero. "I'm sixteen, Wilbur, not six."

Wilbur nodded, still taking in his craftsmanship with a proud smile. They'd had to shove the mattress over to make room for it, and side by side, the tiny bedroom just about fit the two sleeping arrangements.

"You like red," Wilbur pointed out, as if that made everything better.

"Yes," Tommy said. "And I'm *sixteen*."

Wilbur shrugged. "You're still a child."

"Not a baby!"

"They're like, the same thing."

"Wil! I'm not even gonna fit in this!"

Wilbur made a face at him. "You're small."

"I'm literally over six foot tall," Tommy argued, sticking out his tongue at the man. "Just because *you're* a fuckin' giant...."

"Okay, in fairness, I didn't think anything bigger would fit," Wilbur said. "And I wasn't wrong. Tommy, man, you need a bigger apartment."

"Don't I know it," Tommy grumbled. "Still, did you have to get a Lightning McQueen bed?"

Wilbur smirked. "Obviously."

Tommy groaned obnoxiously loud, turning on his heels. "Come on, then, we're already late."

"Phil won't care, I told him I was buying you a bed anyway," Wilbur laughed, following the boy into the kitchen. He took in the cramped space for a moment, and then spoke up again. "Still no roommate?"

"He's probably on his way home by now," Tommy explained, sighing. He wondered if he made it a competition as to how long Wilbur could go without mentioning Ranboo, would that finally shut him up. "He's doing this training day thing for hopefully a new job. Though it's more like a training night, actually — the guy who runs it is a nocturnal hybrid or something."

"Not avoiding me, is he?" Wilbur asked, and Tommy didn't miss how the amusement in his tone was lined with suspicion. It was irritating.

"What, is it a shocker when someone doesn't put aside every obligation in their life to meet the famous hero Ghostbur?"

Wilbur raised an eyebrow at him. "That sounded way too bitter to be a joke."

"Maybe if you cut my roommate some slack, it would be a joke," Tommy remarked dryly.

"Do I have to remind you of how awestruck you were when you first walked onto our floor for that interview?" Wilbur teased, and Tommy was just grateful they weren't going to get into another dispute over Ranboo. "You can't say much when it comes to people meeting their idols."

"Philza Minecraft is my only idol," he replied easily, falling comfortably into their usual banter. "Bold of you to assume anyone would look up to you."

"He says, covered in Ghostbur's blue," Wilbur teased with a broad grin, poking at the stains.

Tommy fought off the incoming hands with a laugh. "Yeah, if anything, Ghostbur idolises *me!*"

"Whatever helps you sleep at night, Tommy."

"Not that fuckin' Lightning McQueen bed, anyway."

"I spent good money on that for you!"

"See? Sounds like I'm *your* hero, not the other way around," Tommy laughed.

Wilbur rolled his eyes affectionately. "Fucking gremlin. Lock your door so we can leave already."

Things were good. Only later that week, Tommy (and Sam) finally finished working on the emergency button bracelet for Ranboo; being able to complete the project had been a great satisfaction, especially on a full stomach, though even better was gifting the former watch-turned-button to Ranboo and watching his face light up. Ranboo had been beyond relieved to have the reassurance of the button on his wrist — knowing that should things go south and he lose control, Tommy would be right there with him. Though despite all the effort he'd put into the button's construction, Tommy was fairly confident that nothing of the sort would happen. Everything had been looking up recently.

If only the universe didn't have it out for him.

It was on patrol one night things started feeling off. Tommy had combed through all of fourteenth twice, even hopping down from the rooftops to double check dark alleys and ensure he wasn't missing anything.

But there hadn't been a single crime, or *anything*, all night.

It wasn't uncommon he would have a quieter night than usual, but to have nothing at all was... out of the ordinary. It felt like the city was holding its breath, and he didn't yet know what for. It left him on edge.

He made his way through fifteenth, their neighbouring district, in a similar fashion. He had never spent much time in fifteenth during the daytime as Tommy, and learning the landmarks and streets of the area in the dark had been confusing at first. It was finally beginning to feel familiar as he performed his routine sweep, checking his suit for any crime pings as he did. Fifteenth was as eerily quiet as his home district that night; it was unsettling. Even with his eyes peeled for anything remotely troublesome, it seemed he was out of a job for the night.

Checking the screen on his suit one last time, he spotted it. There was a location pinged on the map. Tommy clicked on the red marker curiously for the information it was tagged with; *"suspicious person, anonymous tip, no authorities currently investigating."*

Well, it wasn't like he had anything better to do.

He set the location as his destination and gathered his magic into his limbs, throwing himself from one rooftop to another as he hurried after the ping. If it was just one suspicious person all on their own, they could very well have left by the time he arrived. Curiously, as he did approach the location, he found himself looking out over the back of a hospital.

There weren't many hospitals in L'Manberg, despite the city's size; each district had its own general practitioner and pharmacist, but there were only a handful of fully equipped hospitals dotted around. The one in fifteenth was the only one this far west from the city centre, and it was open to more than just its own area, taking patients from fourteenth, sixteenth, seventh and eighth.

This side of the building was almost completely dark, with no main entrances. Only a couple windows glowed softly with light from the rooms within.

Tommy perched himself on the edge of the rooftop he was currently atop, peering into the shadowed streets below for the suspicious figure he was looking for. It took longer than he cared to admit, as all seemed to be still — and then, after several minutes, there was movement.

The figure was short and bulky, not on the street at all but hidden from the glow of lampposts in the grass against the hospital wall. They didn't move much, only shifting their weight from one foot to another. It was certainly odd behaviour. Someone under the influence was Tommy's best bet; be it drugs or alcohol. Probably the former given they were loitering outside a hospital.

With a sigh, Tommy leapt from the rooftop, using his magic to catch his fall gracefully on the footpath below. He would just send them on their way, and then he himself could head home.

He darted across the street, surprised by how small the figure really was as he approached. He tapped their shoulder gingerly, waiting for them to turn around.

It wasn't a drug user at all. It was a kid. And their eyes were blood red.

"TommyInnit," the boy greeted him, a broad smile stretching his features unnaturally wide. "We've been waiting for you."

Tommy's heart plummeted, beating hard against his ribcage. He stumbled back from the boy, magic thrumming beneath his skin and guard up. The bulkiness he had noticed earlier was a too-large winter coat the boy was wearing; given it was a mild summer night, he could only assume that meant nothing good.

"We?" he managed to stammer out, eyes darting around for any company.

"Well, I'm the only one here," the boy replied with a shrug, and *fuck*, he couldn't have been older than thirteen. He leaned in, voice dropping to a whisper. "But the others never leave. They're always watching."

Cold horror had seized Tommy's heart like a clawed fist. It was just a child, he reminded himself. He had to help them.

"Where are they right now?" he asked. "The others?"

"All around you," the boy replied, grinning. "You know who they are. Some of them, at least."

Bad, Tommy thought, heart wrenching. *Skeppy*. *Half the criminals I fight on the regular*. Something had been off about all the red-eyed people he had interacted with, and he should have known it was something bigger the second Bad offered that Tommy join them.

"And your parents?" he tried weakly. "Where are they? Shouldn't you be at home?"

"They don't matter," the boy spat, expression twisting into a vicious scowl. "The only thing that matters is this. My mission."

"And what's your mission?" Tommy asked, barely breathing.

The boy brought his hand to the zipper of his coat, and Tommy's blood ran cold. The sound of the zip coming undone was nothing compared to the beating in his ears, because — oh Primes — there was a bomb strapped to the boy's chest.

A blinking red light accompanied the beeping that soon became apparent. It was live. There was a bomb strapped to the boy's chest, and it was live.

"I'm going to blow up the hospital."

Tommy couldn't breathe. His heart was caught in his throat, choking him, burning him; a dread so cold that he shivered had taken his lungs with a vice grip.

"And you can stop me, if you want," the boy continued nonchalantly, "but only if you join us."

"I — I don't even know who you are," Tommy spluttered. "I don't know what I'm joining, I —"

"It's wonderful," the boy said, eyes lighting up. *Red eyes*. "You'll love it. The Egg will give you everything you'll ever need."

Tommy managed a strangled inhale, eyebrows knitting together in confusion. "The Egg?"

"Power beyond your wildest dreams," the boy breathed, contentment relaxing his face as he seemed to look at something that wasn't quite there.

"What power? I don't understand—"

"It's so easy," the boy said, "so easy to let someone else take control... let them make the choices...."

It clicked in an instant.

"You're not... in control," Tommy murmured, mostly to himself; the boy seemed to have drifted off into his own world. "You're being mind-controlled, you're — hey! How do I snap you out of it?"

The boy's eyes regained focus, darting to stare at Tommy and glimmering with insincere mirth. "You can't!" he exclaimed, and barked out a laugh. Tommy flinched. His eyes went cold. "And I don't want you to."

"You do," Tommy argued, forcing some bravery into his words as he stood his ground. "You're not the one saying these things. The — uh — the Egg, that's what's making you do all of this, I know you don't really believe in this—"

"You don't know me!" the boy shouted, tensing with sudden rage.

Tommy was grasping at straws. "Then let me!" he retorted, desperation setting in fast. "I know you've got family, friends, I dunno — teachers, maybe, people that care, people that matter, more than this, more than the Egg!"

"Nothing matters more than this!"

"What's your name?" Tommy tried. "Tell me about your life, anything, just talk to me—"

"I don't matter more than this!" the boy screeched, hugging himself tight, hugging the *bomb* — and then quick as a whip he relaxed completely, face falling flat. "In two minutes, I will be dead. And so will the people in this hospital. And so will you."

Something heavy turned in Tommy's stomach, and he had to withhold the urge to gag. He was running out of time, and options.

"It doesn't have to go like that," he said carefully. "Listen — you're strong, you can fight this. I know you're still in there—"

"This is the only way," the boy said. "Unless you join us."

"I — I can't," Tommy stammered. "I don't even — you haven't told me anything."

"The Egg will tell you everything. It has knowledge beyond your wildest dreams."

"Just like power?" Tommy interrupted, raising an eyebrow. "What script are they feeding you? Who's actually behind this?"

"The Egg is everything," the boy spat, bitter in the face of Tommy's skepticism. "If you give yourself over to it, all will become clear. It has all the answers you need."

"A fucking egg can't do shit, who's controlling you?" Tommy pressed, frustration building. "I can't help you if you don't tell me anything!"

"Tick tock," the boy whispered. "You can disarm the bomb, Tommy. Join us."

Tommy shook his head vigorously. "I can't — there's another way, there's always another way. Cut the red wire? If you let me—"

He reached forward, but the boy stumbled backwards, eyes wild.

"Don't touch!" he screeched. "Touch me and I'll set it off early."

"Okay, okay, don't do that," Tommy said hastily, heart hammering against his ribs. He stepped backwards, hands in the air in a surrender.

"Join us," the boy repeated, voice reduced to a threatening growl.

"I'm not joining a fucking egg cult!" Tommy shouted. "I don't know who fucking brainwashed you, but I'm not interested! Just take the bomb off, please."

"If we can't have you, we'll take someone else," the boy said. "You mentioned people who matter... I'm sure you have people you love."

Tommy faltered. "You don't know me. You don't know who I... care about."

The boy grinned wide. "Don't we?"

Tommy was silent, cold fear chilling him to the bone. They knew his identity already, and he'd never taken off his mask outside his apartment. Only a small handful of people knew the truth of the face beneath it. What else did they know? How did they know? Was he being watched? Was home even safe?

His heart skipped a beat. Was *Ranboo* safe? Everything that had happened to him in recent weeks — was that their doing too?

"Ten seconds," the boy whispered.

"No, wait, stop, *please*," Tommy begged, panic surging. "We can — you don't have to — oh fuck—"

"Five."

"Stop this!" Tommy screamed, to the boy, to the bomb, to whoever was listening— "Stop it! Please! Snap out of it!"

"One."

Tommy's magic surged forward all of its own accord, desperation the driving force as he grasped the boy and the bomb and the detonation that had already started all in one. The explosion seemed to have halted in time, the blast of it yet to release, contained by swirling red but *burning, scorching*, charring and blistering flesh and cloth alike and the strain of holding it was impossibly strong.

Someone was screaming. In hindsight, it could have been both of them.

"Stop it!" the boy screamed, agony ripping his voice apart. "Stop! It hurts, please!"

Tommy could barely hold his grasp on reality, entire body tense beyond comfort under the demands of his magic. His lungs were strangled with the stench of burning, and he blinked his eyes open to skin flaking in the fire and watery brown eyes staring, pleading.

Brown eyes.

"Please!" the boy screamed, choking on a sob, "let go! It hurts!"

"I don't know what to do!" Tommy cried, shaking from the exertion as icy panic traced his spine. "I can't — I can't save you!"

"Please," the boy sobbed, tears evaporating in the heat before they could fall. "I want to go home! Make it stop!"

Under immense strain, Tommy had already reached the end of his tether; his knees were about to give in and his magic was on the brink of retreat, wavering in its grasp on the explosion. He was struggling to separate the bomb from the boy — it was strapped so tight and it had already detonated and it *hurt*, everything hurt — he couldn't — he *couldn't*—

"Come *on!*" he screamed through grit teeth, the pressure in his skull agonising as he pushed himself past his limits.

With a gasping exhale, he managed to summon the last of his strength and his magic ripped through the straps on the bomb. At the same time, his grasp on it slipping, he threw his magic and everything it contained as high into the air as he could — the boy was falling and the bomb was detonating and Tommy was collapsing, exhausted — one last reach of his magic put a break in the boy's freefall before the explosion was rattling his bones and the ground rose to meet him.

The sky was a fiery blaze of flame on smoke as the blast rocked the world below. Tommy had sent the bomb far above the hospital, but the edge of the building was still caught in the impact as windows shattered and concrete crumbled. Tommy lay where he was, letting his ears ring and limbs ache. He wasn't sure for how long.

He felt hollow.

The screaming startled the creeping black from his vision. It was agonised, raw screaming, the kind that sent cold fear through every nerve in his body and sent bile rising in his throat. Tommy managed to raise his head, staring across the street at the still body of the boy. He was merely a dark lump on the road. Were it not for the screaming and the subtle rising and falling of his chest, Tommy would have thought he was dead.

Tommy steeled himself as he pushed to his knees, crawling across the ground over to the boy. He didn't get far. Something warm and wet was seeping into the material of his suit where his hands and knees were in contact with the ground; a dark substance was rolling down the subtle slope of the road from the boy's body.

Tommy's breath hitched; it was blood.

He fought a gag as he continued on to the boy's side, nausea building steadily in the pit of his stomach. The sight was horrific. What should have been skin was bloody and cracked and burnt from the side of the kid's face all the way down beneath the tatters of his coat, and suddenly Tommy realised that his legs were lying on the ground all *wrong* and the stench of scorched flesh was thick in the air and his throat was blanketed in ash and soot—

"Get away from me!" the boy screamed, frantic and high-pitched and terrified. "Don't touch me! Get away!"

Tommy flinched backwards, eyes wide and heart drumming painfully against his ribs. "I don't —"

"*Please!*" the boy sobbed, chest heaving and charred face screwing up in pain. "Don't hurt me anymore, please — please don't—"

Dread, deep and dark and sickening to the core pooled in Tommy's stomach as he scrambled backwards, suit wet with blood from the ground and nausea twisting his insides into knots. He thought he'd caught him — he thought he'd *saved* him — he'd thought — oh Primes....

More wailing joined the mix and brought his gaze snapping upwards to the broken corner of the hospital. Flames were growing from the rubble, bright against the smoke-filled sky; they illuminated damage worse than he'd initially thought, several rooms taken out by the blast. He hadn't even spared the building; he could help them if only he could get up there but his limbs were weak beneath his weight and he — they were *screaming*—

It was as sirens echoed throughout the city and red and blue lit up the dark, billowing clouds that he finally made the attempt to push himself to his feet. The reality of it all hit him like a train.

He had *failed*.

He hadn't saved them.

An impossibly deep nausea left him sickened to his core, knotting his insides and sending bile up his throat. He fell again to his knees, clutching his stomach in an attempt to fight the rising panic, sickness stirring deep and threatening to bring up more than just bile. There was ash in his throat and blood on his hands, screaming in his ears and the image of the boy's burnt face imprinted on his eyelids — it was too much, it was *all* too much and he had failed and the boy was — he had hurt him so badly, and people were wailing in the hospital....

"Oh fuck," he whispered, voice wobbling and vision blurring.

The sirens were drawing closer, and there were urgent voices from above, more windows opening and people calling down to him. He needed to leave — they'd get the wrong idea finding a vigilante on the scene and a boy injured and a hospital caught in the edge of an explosion — he would be imprisoned — but he couldn't move, couldn't urge the feeling back into his limbs nor the strength to push himself up, couldn't rid himself of the trembling that had taken over his body — *you failed, you didn't save them*—

"Theseus!"

He barely registered the call. His ears had tuned out in favour of playing the boy's screams on repeat — he'd failed and he didn't save them and he'd held him to a bomb exploding and burned him and hurt him—

"Theseus! Are you okay? What happened?"

Tommy turned away shamefully from the familiar voice, wincing as he withheld the urge to gag. He hadn't just failed — he'd nearly killed that kid and Prime only knew about the people in the hospital, he'd had all the time in the world to stop the bomb and did nothing until the last second — he'd made that kid suffer, made him scream before he dropped him from the sky — oh Primes—

"Technoblade? Theseus?"

"I don't know what happened, Sam, I just got here—"

"Pulling up nearby security footage now."

"Did you bring medical? That kid needs attention and someone needs to get up to the top floors asap."

"Charlie's en route and I've already contacted Foolish and Eret."

"The police are on their way, we need to get Theseus out—" There was a pause. *"Oh."*

The dam broke and Tommy sobbed, curling in on himself as his body trembled. Hands were on his shoulders and under his arms, pulling him up with ease even though he felt boneless; he had to lean completely on whoever was holding him up for support, gasping for breath and choking between sobs.

"Kid, listen to me, you're alright, okay?" Techno was speaking to him, gruff voice calm but stern against his ear. "We need to get you out of here."

Tommy blinked harshly through bleary vision, struggling to make out what was going on. Sam stood just in front of him, face pinched tight with concern as he watched a display from his wrist; a scene was playing out in grainy footage, a flat hologram produced by his suit — and then Tommy recognised what he was watching and was gagging again.

"Don't look at it," Techno instructed, a hand guiding Tommy's head to the side. *"Sam.* We've seen enough, turn it off."

Tommy wanted to say something, *anything* — but Sam was there and Sam didn't know and there was a lump in his throat he couldn't swallow and it was choking him and he couldn't breathe and he'd *failed, you tortured that kid it's your fault why didn't you do more you hurt so many people*—

"Theseus," Techno called, voice stern. "We need to get you out of here. Can you walk?"

No, was Tommy's first thought; his legs were like jelly beneath him and he didn't even have the strength to pull himself together. But he didn't want to be carried. He didn't want to be a burden. Not any more than he already was. He nodded.

"I'm going to stay," Sam said. "Get back quick if you can, Tech, I can't stabilise the kid and sort out the hospital at the same time."

"Okay," Techno replied seriously. He kept a firm hold of Tommy's arm. "This way."

Tommy stumbled after the man, leaning on his support more than he would have liked to. His feet moved on clumsy autopilot beneath him; he couldn't feel them, but they were at least holding him up. When they did finally reach whatever quiet alley Techno had led them to, the last of his strength was sapped and he slumped against the hero, exhausted.

"You're okay," Techno murmured, pulling him into an embrace as they both sank to their knees. "It's okay. You're safe."

Tommy cried in earnest then, clutching at Techno's cape as though his life depended on it. It wasn't okay, nothing was okay — and he didn't deserve this kindness, not when such guilt weighed on his conscience and people were hurt and people were dying. He needed to speak, needed to warn Techno about the red eyes and the Egg and whatever cult shit was going on, but his tongue was tied and his hands were trembling too hard to sign.

"Shh, it's okay, kid," Techno said, rubbing a circle into Tommy's back. "You did the best you could."

Tommy wanted to argue, because Techno was wrong, he had to see that; but Techno kept rubbing his back and holding him tight and he found he didn't have the energy to do anything at all. His sobs had been reduced to pathetic hiccups, face still wet beneath his mask.

"Half of that hospital wouldn't be here if you hadn't done what you did," Techno continued. "You weren't trained for this. You did good."

Tommy pushed himself back, shaking his head in disagreement. There were a million things he could have done better, had he reacted faster, had he not waited for the countdown to run out on the bomb; because of him, that boy had suffered the heat of an explosion's core and been thrown like a ragdoll through the sky and the hospital was cracked open and burning and people inside wailing for help; there was blood on his hands literally and metaphorically and calling anything that had happened a good deed on his part felt horribly wrong. He brought his shaky hands up in front of him, struggling for a moment to recall the correct movements.

"Red eyes," he signed, watching Techno's eyes through watery vision to ensure the understanding registered. *"They all have red eyes — the Egg — mind control."*

Techno watched his hands through furrowed eyebrows, concern etched deep into his face. Tommy wasn't sure when he'd pulled up his skull mask.

"Egg?" Techno echoed, confused. "Red eyes?"

Tommy nodded insistently, the motion tiring. *"A group of them. I've seen them on the streets. In the cinema."*

"A group of people with red eyes?" Techno asked. "A violent group, I take it. Terrorists?"

Tommy shrugged. He got more cultist vibes personally, but who was he to slap a definition on them?

"He said something about an egg. The Egg. I think it's mind control. He—" His hands gave a hard tremor as his breath hitched. *"He didn't want to do it. In the end."*

"The kid?" Techno asked quietly.

Tommy nodded, still struggling to find his breath. Techno gave his arm a comforting squeeze and stood, helping Tommy to his feet as well. Tommy swayed for a moment, shutting his eyes against the pressure in his head. His throat still felt too tight to speak. He didn't want to think about the kid, nevermind talk; he wanted to go to sleep and wake up like nothing had happened in the first place.

"How did you find me?" he asked, using his hands instead.

Techno softened. "I was on patrol. When I saw the ping for fifteenth, I figured you'd be there."

Tommy, or Theseus? Tommy wondered dully, though didn't ask the question aloud. He couldn't deal with that conversation, not now, on top of everything. He had more important things to say first, anyway.

"Something else," he started, catching Techno's attention, *"the red eyes. They wanted me to join them."*

Techno's face pinched with concern. "And you didn't."

Tommy shook his head, a shaky inhale accompanying the movement. *"That's why they let the bomb go off."*

Techno frowned. "That's *not* your fault—"

"Listen," Tommy signed, cutting him off. *"He said if I didn't, they'd go after...."*

Techno blinked, waiting patiently for Tommy to continue. "They'd go after...?"

"People close to me," Tommy signed shakily, meeting the man's gaze.

Techno was quiet for a long moment. Tommy glanced away again, nervous. Was this something in which it was important to ensure Techno knew his true identity? Probably.

"Okay," Techno said at last, nodding. "Listen, kid, I think you should come back with me to the tower tonight."

Tommy's heart sank. He began to shake his head, but Techno kept talking.

"I know you're worried about your identity and all that, but we can make it work," Techno pleaded. "We'll be able to help you. Your head can get to you after something like this, you shouldn't be alone."

"I'm not alone," Tommy replied, because he had Ranboo, after all. And he couldn't leave Ranboo alone and worried either. *"I can't. I have to go home."*

Techno's face fell, and Tommy nearly felt guilty.

"I won't force you," he said. "But just... consider it. You don't have to come tonight. Tomorrow, if you're up for it. Or we can meet somewhere."

"I'll think about it," Tommy said, just to appease the man.

Techno nodded, conflict pinching his expression for a moment. He blinked it away. "Do you want me to take you home?"

Tommy's heart skipped a beat.

"To fourteenth," Techno clarified awkwardly. He glanced away.

Tommy's stomach turned. He didn't deserve this. He didn't deserve Techno's kindness, or respect, or whatever him offering to accompany him home was — how could he deserve anything after — oh fuck, he'd really hurt people. He'd really....

"I think I will," Techno said, interrupting Tommy's spiralling train of thought. "You don't look so good."

"No," Tommy replied, shaking his head vigorously. He couldn't let him. Not when the people he had hurt still needed help; they needed to be prioritised. *"No, you need to go with Sam."*

"Sam can wait," Techno insisted. The sincerity in his eyes was disarming. "You matter more than that."

Tommy's bottom lip trembled, threatening to bring on more tears. *How can you say that? How can I matter that much after what I've done?*

"No," he signed, and repeated the movement several times. *"I'm fine."*

"You don't have to be," Techno said softly.

Tommy shook his head again, stepping back from the man. He had to go home. He needed to; he couldn't take the stress of hidden truths and beating around the bush with Techno any longer. He needed someone he could be completely honest with.

If his body gave a cold tremble at the thought of confessing everything to Ranboo, he ignored it.

"I'm going," he said. *"Please don't follow me."*

Techno wilted, but gave a nod of understanding. "Take care, Theseus. Please."

Tommy managed a weak smile, though his expression fell only a second later. He'd never felt so empty. He went to summon his magic just to support himself but found there was no energy to draw from; he had completely spent himself containing the bomb as long as he did.

And all for nothing. What had it achieved?

He had to rely on what was left of his own physical strength as he saluted a weary goodbye to the hero, ignoring the pang of guilt that followed noticing Techno's hurt expression. Home was a distance away he wasn't entirely sure he could make, and as much as he hadn't wanted to drag Techno along, it was a long time to be left alone with his thoughts.

His head was reeling with questions and all the implications of the conversation he'd had before... before it had gone wrong. The Egg, the red eyes — so he'd been correct in thinking there was a connection between the increase of people with scarlet irises and the trouble they'd brought with their appearances. But things seemed to run much deeper than he'd initially thought. None of these people had been in their right minds, to the point where they craved violence and set aside all cares for their own safety.

His mind flitted to Bad; to Skeppy. To the café he'd once worked at and loved, left a smoking wreckage. He could never picture Bad causing such destruction by his own hand, and the thought of someone getting into his head and forcing him into the act was enraging.

But Bad hadn't been hurt. Not like that.

Nausea made a bitter return as Tommy walked alone in the dark back to the apartment. The image of the boy burning in his magic was imprinted on the back of his eyelids, his cries still ringing in his skull; Tommy had done that to him, had made him hurt, had failed to save him, still had his blood on his hands....

A stop in an alleyway in fourteenth to empty his stomach of the sickness proved futile as he came up with nothing but dry heaves. It left him teary and exhausted on the cold ground, and it was only the thought of home that pushed him to his feet again and kept him going. He had to make sure Ranboo was safe.

At long last, he was pulling their unlocked kitchen window open and climbing into the apartment. He could hear the buzzing of the TV from the bedroom, and Ranboo's scuffling was quick to follow as Tommy let himself slide to the floor.

"You're awake," Tommy mumbled, pulling off his mask wearily.

To his surprise, Ranboo was teary-eyed. "I couldn't sleep," the hybrid admitted, crouching down beside him. "I had a bad feeling."

"Mother hen instinct," Tommy joked lamely. The humour didn't seem to land.

"Oh, Tommy," Ranboo whispered. "Awesamdude was on the news, he was explaining everything."

Tommy might have cried again if he wasn't so drained. Regardless, his voice still cracked when he spoke. "Were there... were there casualties?"

"Don't ask that." Ranboo's voice was stern. "Don't do that to yourself."

Tommy's heart sank. "I really fucked up."

"It wasn't your fault," Ranboo said, a hand gripping Tommy's own. "It wasn't."

"How can you say that?" Tommy whispered shakily, pulling his hand away so Ranboo didn't have to wet his own palms with red. "Ranboo, he was — he was begging me, he didn't want to — didn't — oh *Primes*."

"You wouldn't hurt anyone," Ranboo said. "You said that to me, remember?"

"But I *did*—"

"Did you mean to?" Ranboo asked, and Tommy fell quiet. "There's always bad days, just like the heroes. You can't save everyone."

"The hospital," Tommy croaked. "There were people crying — and I — it was—"

"Not your fault," Ranboo murmured. "You still saved so many people. They put that bomb there, not you."

Tommy couldn't understand the sense of that argument. He had fucked up beyond belief; he had burned that kid that badly, he had sent the bomb up to that corner of the hospital, he was the one the boy was terrified of in the end even having been mind controlled and strapped to a bomb.

It was with a shuddering inhale a cold realisation struck him. Ranboo's face was tight with worry as he watched his roommate carefully, and he moved his hand to his shoulder, offering a comforting squeeze. It did little to settle Tommy's emotions.

"I can't do it," he whispered. "I can't do it anymore."

Ranboo met his gaze, concerned. "What do you mean?"

"Being a vigilante," Tommy said quietly. "It's too much, Ranboo, I can't do it. No more secrets, no more lies."

"Are you sure?" Ranboo asked softly. "You spend any night you take off patrol kicking yourself."

Tommy shook his head. "I'm done. I can't do it anymore."

Ranboo was quiet a moment, contemplative. "Okay," he murmured. "If you need to step back, I think you should. You matter most."

Tommy nodded, surprised to find the weight of his decision seemed only to add to the pressure on his shoulders rather than take from it. He pulled his knees in to his chest, resting his chin on his legs tiredly. He wished he could sleep it all away and wake up fresh with no memory of anything.

"What are you going to tell SBI?" Ranboo asked gently.

Tommy shrugged. "I'll call in sick," he mumbled. "Figure it out in the morning."

"Okay."

"Tell us what?"

Tommy nearly jumped out of his skin at the third voice, flinching hard as his gaze snapped up to the doorway.

It was Ghostbur.

The two boys remained frozen in place as the man took in the scene with wide eyes, understanding slowly registering. Tommy could feel his heart in his throat. He was still wearing his suit, face red and wet and blotchy, hands warm and sticky in his gloves.

"It's not what it looks like," Ranboo stammered.

Ghostbur stared at the pair, mouth opening and closing wordlessly, and an exhausted frustration erupted in Tommy's chest like a fire. This was just the cherry on the fucking cake, wasn't it?

"Go on, say it," he spat, furious at the way his vision watered. "I'm a liar and a fraud, and you hate me. I'm a vigilante, and I betrayed your trust, and I'm horrible and I can't even — can't —"

Ghostbur winced as Tommy's voice broke. He glanced rapidly between the pair, uncertain and upset. "Don't say that," he said. "Don't — you're not—"

"It's true, isn't it?" Tommy hissed. "There's not even a surprise party. I lied about that too, because I was selfish, and I wanted you to prioritise me, and...."

"Oh," Ghostbur said with soft disappointment.

"Just go," Tommy mumbled. "Go tell Wilbur. Ruin my life."

"Tommy," Ranboo murmured sternly, eyebrows pinching together.

Tommy pushed himself to his feet, not daring to spare a glance at either of them as he stumbled for their bedroom. "I can't do this."

"Tommy?" Ghostbur called, hesitant.

Tommy shook his head, blinking hard. He'd never been so overwhelmed in his life; it was all too much and the pressure was drowning him. He paused in the doorway, slumping against it, and managed to glance just once more over his shoulder with red-rimmed eyes.

"Please... just go."

Chapter End Notes

SUMMARY: on patrol, tommy encounters a red-eyed kid with a bomb who asks him to join their group for the egg - tommy declines and the bomb goes off but he uses his magic to delay the explosion enough to save the kid and send the bomb into the sky. the explosion still catches part of the hospital and the kid is left badly injured, and tommy spirals until techno arrives and calms him down. tommy goes home where ranboo comforts him, and they are interrupted by ghostbur, who sees tommy in his suit; tommy leaves the room before much can be said.

i second-guessed this chapter so much akdhkaja it has been changed and edited a dozen times at this point, i hope it delivers!

Philza's Interlude

Chapter Summary

Phil's thoughts on family, the past, and what's to come for the city.

TW// mentions of disordered eating

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for [notes](#)

Phil was not a father.

Not biologically, anyway. He'd never thought much about kids, not when it mattered. His life had been complete and full and satisfactory without them, so he'd never given it much thought. He was content with everything as it was; he woke up, had breakfast with his wonderful partner, went to hero training while she went to work. Any time he wasn't patrolling and she had a break, they spent it together. They had everything they needed already; children were, in Phil's eyes, an unnecessary addition.

Kristin had wanted kids. She had always been capable of seeing the opportunity of what wasn't yet there, and in her eyes, that made children something wonderful. And she had a way with words like no-one else. During lazy evenings, when she would curl up against Phil's side, a dark wing wrapped around her like a blanket, she would tell him to close his eyes and imagine their lives plus one (or plus two, or three, or however many she dared try and convince him of that particular day). She would describe their laughter as they ran across the floor, tiny, uncoordinated feet stamping on carpet; she would entice him with the thought of spending the holidays with a family, of putting them away to bed with a story and a fond kiss, of baking cakes for birthdays and listening to little voices argue over who got to lick the spoon. She created vibrant memories of moments that hadn't happened yet, and Phil let himself be swept up by her words. He hadn't wanted kids, but if Kristin did, he wouldn't ever say no.

It was late one night that he made the promise; once they were married, and everything settled down after the wedding, they could start a family of their own, and bring to life all the softly-spoken scenarios they had only dared dream of before then.

But the wedding never came to be, and Kristin was gone before he had time to truly appreciate her being there in the first place.

Phil hadn't wanted kids, but ten years later when he found himself looking into the faces of two young teenagers, eager and determined, he knew in a heartbeat that he would do anything for them.

The Watchtower was finally getting itself established at the time. The idea of having an organisation of numerous heroes based in L'Manberg to protect and defend the city had been but a hope in the wind when he and Kristin had started working for its bare beginnings. The *Three Hearts Agency*, as it had been called, because there were just three of them; just Phil and Foolish and a young Dream, all still in training. So much had changed since. Somewhere along the line, Sam and Puffy had joined their ranks, and Charlie soon followed; then, in an effort to increase the number of heroes, the Watchtower was officially renamed and started hiring. Dream was given his team first, as Sapnap and George topped the rankings of their training class. Phil had the second pick, and it couldn't have been anyone but Wilbur and Technoblade.

They were barely half his age, gangly and bushy-haired and buck-toothed. They were *kids*; but in them Phil was reminded of Kristin's words and his own promise and they seemed to fit the hole in his heart like they were made for it.

The team had a rough start. Wilbur and Techno fought more often than they got along, egos clashing with sharp words that cut deep and all the pent-up anger of teenagers given too much responsibility. Phil had to play the mediator, and even then there were days where the words were flung his way and nobody wanted to listen or back down. It was frustrating. They had no coordination and too many unspoken issues not yet worked out of their systems.

But there were days that made it all worth it. Days where he would return from an exhausting patrol and find dinner had been made and the floor tidied up; days where one of them was upset and instead of aggravation there was understanding. Days where they worked through the knots and came together as a team, and made more steps forward than they did steps back.

And when Techno one night confessed the tragedy that had befallen his family at the hand of his enhancement and the reason he had left to become a hero, Phil was there to rub his back and reassure him and made every promise to help him control it. And when Wilbur was

cursed by a hostile vigilante and hatred and self-deprecation festered in his mind, Phil was there to hold him every night he needed it and wipe away his tears.

And moment by moment, day by day, Wilbur and Technoblade became his sons.

Not by blood. They weren't even remotely related; but Phil loved them all the same. More than anything. And part of him saw Kristin in their smiles, and felt as though, somehow, she'd sent him exactly what he didn't know he needed.

He only wished she was there to see them.

Life continued as such for nearly seven years. The two kids that he'd been faced with that day had since grown into their long limbs and buck teeth; Wilbur had cut his hair, and Techno grew his out. They were young adults now, full heroes, intelligent and witty and strong, the pair of them — but still his sons. Always his sons.

They were a stronger team than ever, considered among the elite in not just L'Manberg, but the country as a whole. Techno hadn't once lost control in the time he'd been working with Phil, and Wilbur — well, Wilbur would always be a little bitter about vigilantes, but he was coping much better. And Phil was just as fond of Ghostbur as he was Wilbur.

Everything was perfect and in its place. Phil was content with the way things were, sure that nothing much else could change. He had his family, and it felt whole.

And then he started looking for an assistant. And then he met TommyInnit.

He had never hired anyone faster. Had it been an impulsive decision? Absolutely, but he couldn't find it in himself to regret any of it. In walked this scruffy kid with messy blonde locks and clothes that didn't quite go together, a mouth that couldn't stop running and a grin nervous but determined, and Phil was sold. All it took was Techno agreeing that he liked him and Wilbur's reluctant admission that he wasn't the worst, and he was picking up the phone to give Tommy that call.

And suddenly there was space in the family for one more.

Phil couldn't really help himself. He saw so much of his boys in Tommy, especially when they'd been younger and just as wide-eyed and out of place, just as convinced it was nothing more than a job they'd signed up for. He had Wilbur's bushy hair and wit and Techno's long limbs and dry humour, and his personality was still all his own, loud and bold and endearing.

Then there were the injuries. Primes, if anything gave Phil whiplash with the memories of Wilbur and Techno as kids, it was the constant injuries Tommy had. As heroes in training, inexperienced and new to the field, days without a bad bruise or wound were more infrequent than days with one for Wilbur and Techno — but Phil had been their mentor. He could keep an eye on them for the most part, protect them; and when he couldn't, he was at least there to wrap them up and comfort them. He couldn't do that with Tommy.

It didn't make sense. The boy was a true enigma. He was an assistant, not a young hero; he helped with paperwork and kept track of information, not criminals. He was unenhanced, just a human — a vulnerable human — and he had no reason to be dealing with any sort of violence to the degree that some of his bruises suggested. Yet he came to work nearly every day with another one. It broke Phil's heart, not just seeing the boy in pain, but especially seeing him so desperate to hide it; clearly, there was something wrong, something happening behind the scenes that he didn't know about. He feared the worst.

So he invited Tommy with him on his trip to the city in the south — offered him a night away from home to get a break from L'Manberg. And then he asked Puffy to keep an eye on him. It felt a little invasive, having her essentially spy on the kid, but it was with good intentions; and it gave him answers. Yes, Tommy had been hiding another bruise under his jumper — but his behaviour didn't necessarily fit with that of most victims of domestic abuse. And looking into records on Tommy's roommate, he couldn't find any past grievances or criminal activity.

Not only that, but when he had — twice now — suggested the idea to Tommy that perhaps his apartment wasn't safe, the boy had adamantly disagreed with them.

Yet nothing else seemed to fit the picture. If it wasn't abuse, Phil truly had no clue; surely the boy wasn't getting attacked on the street *that* often. He was left worried for Tommy nonetheless. The concern he had for his injuries didn't even begin to cover how he felt about his living conditions; seeing his street and his tiny apartment in person had been a shock to

his system. It was obvious that Tommy had been struggling financially, but for all the boy's pride, he hadn't uttered a word of it to SBI. It had taken him fainting in their kitchen from a lack of food to admit anything — and fuck if that hadn't given Phil heart palpitations. Hearing Techno afterwards confessing how light Tommy was in his arms had shattered something in his chest.

He didn't want to be overbearing, but he only wished that Tommy felt comfortable enough with any of them to confide the truth. It hurt, watching the boy suffer in silence and being helpless to put a stop to whatever was ailing him; Phil would do anything for him if only he gave the word. Tommy had become as much a part of his family as Wilbur or Techno were, and they had never slipped up and called him "Dad".

His chest warmed at the thought. That moment was one he had tucked away in a special place in his heart, filled with all the memories most important to him that he would ensure to remember until he could share them with Kristin one day.

One day. Oh, how he missed her.

"Phil! Your toast is burning."

Phil was startled out of his thoughts by the call, and shook his head to clear his mind. Techno gestured to the toaster, where the smell of bread had become more smoky than he usually liked.

"Thank you, Tech, I guess I dozed off," he admitted with a laugh, and reached for a plate. "Tired this morning."

"Or you're gettin' old," Techno joked, a smug grin breaking up his weary expression. Techno was tired too; Phil knew he'd had a rough patrol last night. The hospital bombing in fifteenth had been all over the news, and the vigilante Theseus had become the centre of attention following his involvement in it. The discourse was exhausting to read through — people calling for his arrest, others insisting he was pure evil, behind all the rising violence across the city. To Phil, and thankfully most of the public, it was obvious that Theseus had done his best to prevent the situation as a whole, and Techno's mission report backed it up.

"Oi, where's that respect for your elders?" Phil shot back, though grinned as he fished his toast out of the toaster. "Is Wil up yet? He's gonna have to go fetch Tommy soon."

"I saw him earlier," Techno replied. "He might've gone back to bed. Was complaining about a headache."

"It's more than a headache," came a whiny, muffled voice from around the corner, and a disgruntled Wilbur appeared, head in his hands. "It's a fucking *migraine*. I don't know what that fucking ghost is playing at, but I'm gonna kill him."

Phil sat himself at the table beside Techno, watching the older of his boys worriedly. "Is he hiding things from you again?"

"Clearly," Wilbur muttered, collapsing into the chair opposite them. He let his hands fall to the tabletop, and his head was soon to follow — not before Phil caught a glimpse of the shadows beneath his eyes and the mess he'd made of his hair. "I know he was hiding Tommy's apartment from me, the prick, but this is something bigger. I don't remember anything from last night, and I slept like absolute shit."

Phil softened, reaching an arm across the table to give Wilbur's hand a pat and sympathise with him. "I'll ask him about it tonight, if I can catch him."

"Please," Wilbur groaned, and raised his head a fraction to look at Techno. "Grab me the pain stuff, Tech?"

Techno nodded, standing to reach for their medicine cabinet and producing the bottle of pills. He slid it across the table to Wilbur, who straightened to open it and immediately threw four or five down his throat.

"Wilbur," Phil chided, snatching the bottle back. "Fuck's sake, mate, you don't need that many."

Wilbur's forehead hit the table again with a thump. "I'm dying, Phil."

"Yes, and I'll make you a tea or something in a minute," Phil replied, handing the bottle back to Techno. "No coffee though."

Wilbur groaned. "But I'm tired...."

"Nope. Coffee is not gonna help your headache."

"How am I gonna drive, Phil?"

"I could drive," Techno offered.

Wilbur's head snapped up to shoot a glare at the hybrid. "No. Collecting Tommy is my job."

Techno smirked at the hero. "Then I think you'll drive just fine."

The three were startled by the chime of Phil's ringtone. It wasn't usual Phil would receive a call so early in the day, but he picked up his phone nonetheless, glancing curiously at the screen. It was Tommy.

"Well, speak of the devil," he mused with a smile, and both Wilbur and Techno watched him intently as they realised who it was. Phil pressed the answer button, raising the phone to his ear. "Hello, Tommy."

There was a slight delay on the line, nothing in response but buzzy static until, *"hello."*

Phil blinked. "Is everything alright?"

A pause. *"Oh, yeah. Um, everything's fine. I just, uh, I don't think I can come into work today."*

Phil frowned, meeting Wilbur's fallen expression as the man listened in on the call. "Are you okay?"

"Yeah, all good. Just, um, a bit sick."

"Sick?" Wilbur echoed quietly, eyebrows knitting together in concern. Techno, too, looked quite worried.

"Are you sure you're alright, mate?" Phil asked. "Is someone with you?"

"My roommate's minding me," Tommy replied. There was something off about his voice; it lacked the boy's usual energy. Maybe that was the sickness. *"I'll be fine. Probably be in tomorrow."*

"Put him on loudspeaker," Wilbur instructed.

"I'm just gonna put you on loudspeaker, Tommy," Phil warned the boy, before he set his phone on the table, tapping the button.

"Oh — er — okay," Tommy replied, voice much louder as it buzzed on the granite worktop.

"Hey Tommy," Wilbur greeted, leaning in to the phone. "You good, man?"

There was a hesitation. *"Oh, um, hey Wil,"* Tommy said — and maybe it was the poor signal on his end, but his voice sounded shaky. *"What's up, big man?"*

"Are you okay?" Wilbur asked, expression pinched tight with worry. "Do you want me to come over?"

"What — no, no! Don't come over. I'm fine, swear."

"I can send Ghostbur, if you'd prefer," Wilbur offered, the slightest bitter undertone to his voice.

"No! No, please don't send Ghostbur. I don't need anyone, I'm fine."

"You don't sound fine."

"Yeah, I'm just really sick. I don't want to infect any of you. Actually, I think I'm gonna go get sick now, so I've gotta go. Please don't come to my house. Bye."

The call was over before any of them could reply, beeping loudly. Phil pocketed his phone again, heart sinking. He exchanged a concerned glance with the other two; Wilbur clearly shared his sentiment of worry, eyebrows furrowed together; Techno had gone quite pale.

"So we all agree he's not fine, right?" Wilbur said.

Phil didn't like to accuse Tommy of lying so blatantly, but he had to admit that he was concerned for the boy. Something was clearly bothering him, and Phil had a dreadful feeling that it wasn't just sickness. He nodded wordlessly.

"I think I'm gonna go check on him," Wilbur said decisively, pushing himself up from his seat.

"Wilbur, wait," Techno interrupted hastily. "He asked us not to, we can't very well go charging in against his wishes."

"As much as I hate to admit it, Techno does have a point," Phil added. "I'm worried about him too, don't get me wrong, but we shouldn't push his boundaries."

"He's not okay!" Wilbur retorted, glancing between them. "We can't just leave him all on his own—"

"Maybe that's what he needs," Phil cut in gently. "Just like how you need time to yourself to work through things. He sees us everyday, we can talk to him tomorrow."

"Cut the bullshit, Phil, I know you're more worried than that," Wilbur argued, jaw tensing. "I don't trust his roommate. What if he's badly injured? What if he's not safe?"

"We can't just break into their apartment," Phil replied, raising his eyebrow at the man. "And we have nothing against his roommate."

"Except every one of Tommy's injuries ever," Wilbur snapped. "I'll phase through the door. It's not breaking in if nothing breaks."

"That is... very flawed logic," Techno deadpanned.

Wilbur rolled his eyes. "I'll get a warrant if I have to, but I'm not leaving Tommy alone."

"Wilbur," Phil warned, ignoring the pang in his chest. "I know you don't want to. None of us do, but we have to trust him."

Wilbur stared at him for a moment, and then fell back into his seat, expression forlorn. He ran his hands over his face and through his hair again, pressing hard against his scalp. "This kid

is gonna be the death of me. If not him, then fucking Ghostbur — *fuck*, this headache is killing me."

Phil softened. "Sleep it off?" he suggested.

"I don't trust that fucking ghost," Wilbur mumbled. He sighed. "I just wish he would talk to us, Primes."

"I know."

"Like, he knows we care about him, right? But he doesn't trust us at all."

"I know," Phil murmured. "We can only be patient with him."

"I hate being patient," Wilbur muttered. He rose again. "I'm gonna go see if Fundy is up for an early patrol. Maybe the fresh air will help my head."

"No breakfast?" Phil asked, raising an eyebrow.

Wilbur scowled. "Well, *somebody* said I can't have coffee, and I can't eat before coffee."

Phil managed a small smile of amusement. "As long as you have something before lunch."

"I'll take a protein bar or something with me."

Phil nodded in approval as the hero headed back in the direction of their bedrooms to get changed. He glanced sideways at Techno, who was staring at his uneaten cereal.

"You're awfully quiet this morning, mate," he pointed out. "Everything alright?"

Techno didn't startle immediately, only giving a small nod. Eventually he pulled his head up, focus entering his eyes once again as he met Phil's gaze. His eyebrows were furrowed, somewhere between concerned and thoughtful.

"Yeah," he said, and stood. "I'll be in the training room."

"By yourself? And you haven't finished your food," Phil said.

Techno shrugged, moving his bowl to the sink. "Not hungry."

Phil sighed, watching Techno head in the direction of the training room.

"Why do I even try?"

The day moved too slowly and quietly in Tommy's absence. Phil wouldn't have thought that the boy brought so much life to the tower, but without him, the difference was obvious; there was a gaping hole in their routine in the form of an empty fourth chair at the kitchen table for lunch. Things felt too still, too silent; and the weight of their worry didn't make it any easier. Maybe he was being clingy, or overbearing, but it was difficult going through his day without missing Tommy and the energy he brought with him.

The lunch table was all too quiet as the three heroes sat down together, each about as uninterested in their food as they were in conversation. Wilbur was still nursing his headache, the signs of his weariness yet to fade; Techno looked ill, which was an odd expression to see on the hybrid. Phil frowned. Seeing his sons so downcast was not making the day any easier to bear.

"How was patrol?" he asked Wilbur, in an attempt to strike up some sort of conversation.

Wilbur shrugged. "Wasn't much happening so early in the morning," he said, poking at his food. "Saw a vigilante up in fourth."

Techno raised his head, interest piqued.

"Fundy wanted to go after them, but..." Wilbur sighed, rubbing at his temples again. "I dunno. I wasn't in the mood. Too tired."

Phil frowned at the curly-haired man; Wilbur definitely wasn't feeling himself if he had passed up a chance to pursue a vigilante. "Did you recognise them, or is it a new face?"

"New face," Wilbur muttered. He met Phil's gaze for a moment. "Maybe a new recruit for your whole training thing you're doing."

Phil nodded, thoughtful. "I might go out there later and see if I can track them down," he noted. It had been a while since he'd left the tower for anything akin to a patrol, and his wings were dying to be stretched out.

Wilbur just nodded wordlessly, returning his attention to his food. Techno, too, slumped back in his seat. They were quiet for another long moment, but Phil couldn't find it in him to want to eat much more.

"I miss Tommy," Wilbur mumbled.

It seemed inevitable that the topic would roll back around to their assistant. Phil wasn't complaining; he agreed wholeheartedly with Wilbur's sentiment.

"It's odd, not having him around," he mused.

"It's miserable," Wilbur whined. "I swear the weekends aren't this boring."

Techno nodded. "He's part of our weekdays now."

"More than that," Wilbur scoffed. "He's part of the whole group. He's like, the fourth member of SBI."

"He's not a hero," Techno said carefully.

"Being heroes isn't what makes us SBI, though," Phil murmured. He swirled the tea in his mug, reminiscing for a moment. "You know, he called me Dad the other day."

Wilbur's head rose in surprise, eyes wide; even Techno turned to properly acknowledge him.

"Really?" Wilbur asked, a slow grin spreading across his expression. "And you didn't get it on camera?"

"It was when we dropped off the groceries to his apartment," Phil explained, smiling warmly. "When I gave him the emerald. He called me Dad."

Wilbur looked positively gleeful. "Aww, and you gave him the emerald?"

Phil nodded pleasantly. "He was a bit embarrassed afterwards. Shut the door in my face."

"Aww, Tommy!"

"You two do look alike," Techno pointed out, and even he had retained some of the colour in his cheeks.

"That's fucking adorable," Wilbur said.

"Him calling you Wilby was better," Techno argued.

Wilbur's face flushed. "That was different," he huffed. "He called Phil *Dad*."

"Kristin would have loved him," Phil murmured.

Silence fell over the table. Wilbur and Techno were both staring at him with uncertainty; his mind caught up with his words and he smiled a little awkwardly. He supposed it wasn't often he brought up his partner in front of the boys.

"Sorry," he said with a light laugh. "I've just been thinking about her recently." He paused, smile fading. "It's been so long."

Wilbur's gaze had dropped back to his plate. Techno, on the other hand, looked thoughtful.

"It's okay," he said, and hesitated. "I think about my family too sometimes."

Phil's heart wrenched, and he lay a hand on Techno's shoulder, a silent comfort. Wilbur glanced up and between them.

"You guys are my family," he said softly. His cheeks reddened, and he ducked his head. "So is Tommy."

"Yeah," Phil agreed quickly, easing some of Wilbur's embarrassment. "He is, mate. I get it."

"And he doesn't even have parents," Wilbur continued, expression falling. "Just that roommate of his. Fuck, I wish we could help him."

Techno dropped his head, eyebrows furrowed. Phil spared the hybrid a worried glance, though returned his focus to Wilbur.

"I know," he agreed. "Primes, when I saw his apartment—"

"It's horrible! It's *tiny*," Wilbur complained, throwing up his hands. "And — fuck, he wasn't even eating."

The reminder sent a wave of nausea through Phil's system. He could have raised Tommy's pay months ago had the boy said the word, but instead he had struggled in silence and starved himself because he couldn't even afford food, or a bed, or barely any of life's necessities.... If only he had noticed earlier, he could have spared Tommy so much pain.

"I was thinking of asking him to move in," he admitted, and that certainly brought two pairs of eyes back staring at him again. He chuckled. "Probably jumping the gun a bit. We're just his employers to him, I wouldn't want to overwhelm him or anything. But Primes, he deserves better than that apartment."

"That would be really nice," Wilbur agreed, a small smile creeping into the corners of his lips. "But yeah, he'd probably be shocked."

"I think it's probably too much for him right now," Techno added.

"Maybe in the autumn?" Phil suggested, unable to fully contain his excitement at the thought.

Wilbur grinned. "Primes, Phil, you sound like you have adoption papers prepared already."

Phil just chuckled, pretending he hadn't half-considered that thought either. He just wanted Tommy to be safe, and there was nobody he trusted more to keep an eye on him than himself

— plus, everyone at the tower loved the kid. Sam certainly did, and even from their short meeting, he could tell that Foolish, Eret and Fundy were taken with the boy. And Puffy....

He hadn't heard from Puffy in a long time. Too long. After everything that had happened during that trip, and the meeting with Schlatt, and the drinks, it was fair to say he was worried about her. None of the Dream Team had been in contact either, but he wasn't as close with them as he was the Captain. He knew she was a capable hero, and that was the only thing that kept him reassured; plus, her enhancement meant she rarely got herself into trouble, as she was always able to tell if someone was telling the truth. It would take a real weasel to get past that by exploiting the loopholes.

Still, he kept it in mind to check for a message pretty regularly. Tommy's injuries and troubles weren't the only thing plaguing his mind in recent weeks; the whole city felt off, with the increases in violence, the recent bombings and concerns of the council. Puffy's lack of communication was just another part of what he worried was a bigger issue than he'd first thought.

And he'd be damned if he let any of his family get hurt when it all came crashing down.

Chapter End Notes

we interrupt this programme to bring u dadza being a dad

Sleepover (Again)

Chapter Summary

Tommy struggles to cope with the events of his last night on patrol and his decision to retire Theseus.

TW// descriptions of injury

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for [notes](#)

Tommy was so tired.

Every part of his body felt as though it had been infused with lead. He lay in bed all day — that stupidly funny Lightning McQueen bed that Wilbur had gifted him; and oh, *Wilbur*, who Ghostbur had protected Tommy from and lied to, and Tommy had said he was done with the secrets but he still couldn't tell the truth, he wasn't ready — but he couldn't sleep. The gravity of what had transpired that night was a weight too heavy to fight. If his life had been a boat at sea, smooth some days but rocky most and pushed onwards by the promise of light on the horizon, the boat had capsized and trapped him under the surface, unsure of which way was up and slowly losing air.

He was beyond grateful for Ranboo's company through it all, though even his kind words of assurance weren't always enough to pull Tommy out of his own head. He made Tommy food and got him to sit at the table instead of in bed, but it didn't make much difference. Tommy didn't want to eat. He didn't want to do anything.

He didn't deserve to.

Ranboo at least managed to keep any news coverage surrounding the incident out of their apartment; the TV was kept firmly off and he ensured Tommy didn't try to look up anything on his phone. He supposed that did make things better — though not knowing the full extent of the damage he'd done hurt even more, in a way. Because that meant it was probably worse than he'd thought.

He had scrubbed his whole body in the shower, his hands especially. He couldn't get them clean enough, not even when they were red raw and hurt to the touch; all he could feel was the sticky warmth of the kid's blood between his fingers, and with that came the taste of ash on his tongue and the smell of burning flesh and screaming in his ears and the sight of what he'd done to the boy and he was spiralling again, down, down, down.

It was a guilt heavier than anything he'd experienced.

He didn't want to see SBI again, not for a while — or rather, didn't want them to see him. Not like this. He wanted to separate himself entirely from anything hero-related, turn a new leaf and never think about it again, but it had become ingrained within him; Theseus wasn't just an alter ego, he was *Tommy*, and Tommy fought crime and Tommy saved people and without that part of him was he even himself anymore? But he couldn't bring himself to face it again, couldn't put on a bloodstained suit and move on like nothing had happened. Like the weight of the world wasn't crushing his shoulders, like he hadn't hurt people he'd promised to help.

But as much as he didn't want to see SBI, part of him yearned for the comfort they offered. They were always there to pick him up every time he fell. And as heavy a blow as this had been, it was no different, broken down to its basics; he'd had a rough night on patrol, and his heart sought their soothing words and safe embraces and the concern in their faces every time they realised something was wrong because they *cared*. They cared so unconditionally, despite his mistakes, despite his lies and deceit and truths they didn't even know of. They deserved to know the truth. But, selfishly, he wasn't even ready for that. He couldn't risk losing them; couldn't even bear the thought of it.

"You going to work tomorrow?" Ranboo had asked quietly, speaking into the cool darkness of their room as they both lay still, unable to sleep.

Tommy was staring at the ceiling. If he focused on one particular crack long enough, he could pretend it was the night he'd first noticed it, when cracks in the ceiling had been the worst of his problems.

"Dunno," he mumbled, voice cracking from lack of use. His throat was dry. "I told them I would, but.... I'm so tired."

"I know," Ranboo whispered. "You can take as long as you need."

I can't, Tommy thought. *I might be lying here forever*. "You have your interview tomorrow."

"Tomorrow night," Ranboo said. Sheets crinkled as he moved on the mattress, and Tommy felt eyes on the side of his head. "I can stay, if you want."

"No," Tommy argued immediately. "Don't be ridiculous. You need the job."

"And then something came up, and maybe I won't make it to the interview," Ranboo murmured. "They can probably reschedule."

"Don't do that," Tommy croaked, and turned his head to meet his roommate's gaze. Ranboo glanced away. "I'll be fine, Ranboo."

"Will you?"

Tommy had to look away again, eyes returning to the crack in the ceiling. If he focused on it long enough, he could ignore the urge to scrub his hands until they bled, could pretend he didn't still hear the screams from the hospital. *Focus. Don't think*.

"I'll have to go get groceries tomorrow as well," Ranboo continued, after a minute of suffocating silence. "We're *finally* running out again."

Tommy nearly smiled; SBI had gone a little overboard when they'd bought them all that food. His mood was swiftly dampened by the realisation that groceries cost money, and he was still, for the time being, their only source of income. Something tightened in his throat.

"I'll go to work tomorrow."

Ranboo sat up. "Are you sure?"

"Yeah," Tommy said. "Fuckers are probably lost without me."

"You don't have to," Ranboo said, concerned. "It's only been a day."

Somehow it felt like it had been so much longer than that.

"Yeah, I've been moping around here too long already," Tommy replied. He couldn't find the energy to add any humour to his tone. "I'll be fine. I mean, shit can't get any worse than this."

Ranboo was quiet; Tommy could physically feel the worry radiating off of the hybrid in waves.

"If you're sure, Tommy," he relented after a moment. "If you need to come home early or anything, I'll still be here most of the day."

"I'll be fine," Tommy repeated. He was beginning to feel like a broken record.

The room fell quiet for another minute. Tommy turned over onto his side as something tightened in his throat; he'd gotten so used to having Ghostbur show up that his absence felt like a gaping wound. *You scared him off. You're the reason he'll probably never come back.*

Maybe he should just own up and bare his soul to SBI. Prime knew he'd been fucking up everything in his life already; might as well go for gold.

"Night, Ranboo."

"Goodnight, Tommy."

Tommy woke up early after a restless night; or rather, got out of bed early when lying there hoping for sleep had become futile. He'd gotten such little rest in the past two days he was sure the bags beneath his eyes were purple. SBI would almost certainly notice, but they'd seen him with worse. He could just play it off as his supposed illness not letting him sleep.

After breakfast with Ranboo, he sat outside on the steps to their building so he couldn't talk himself out of going to work. Ranboo stayed inside, already writing up a list of what was missing from their kitchen; there wasn't much else to do alone in their apartment, so Tommy assumed he was going to go grocery shopping straight away. Wilbur pulled up in his car after a few minutes.

"Hey Tommy," he greeted, as Tommy clumsily made his way down the stairs to meet him. "How's it going?"

Tommy shrugged, avoiding his gaze. "Fine."

Wilbur frowned. "You said you were sick yesterday. Are you okay?"

Tommy rubbed at his eyes; he really didn't want to have that conversation. "I'm fine, Wil."

"You sure—?"

"Just really tired," Tommy cut him off. "Can we go?"

Wilbur's expression fell further, but he relented, opening the door for Tommy. He phased into the car not a moment later, turned on the radio and they were off.

Usually the two would talk over whatever was playing in the background — unless it was a particularly good song, in which case they would sing along — but Tommy didn't have the energy that morning, and Wilbur seemed to sense that, not pushing any conversation. The

buzz of the radio served only as background noise while Tommy watched the city fly by. It was only as one word in particular caught his ear did his focus snap to the news channel they were listening to and his heart plummeted.

"... investigation into the bombing of the hospital in the fifteenth district is still ongoing as several civilians are being treated with severe injuries. The hospital sustained major structural damage to its upper floors in the explosion, while two nurses are among those wounded. Police are still inquiring about the involvement of a vigilante frequently seen in the fourteenth and fifteenth districts known as Theseus, though official hero the Blade has released a statement claiming the vigilante's intentions were not to cause harm. Contradictory to this statement, according to one detective we spoke with, is security footage not released to the public. Additionally, a twelve-year-old boy, Cian Anderson, was left with third degree burns in—"

"Can you change the station?" Tommy asked suddenly, a heavy nausea stirring in his stomach.

Wilbur glanced sideways at him, surprised. "Is something—?"

"Just change it," Tommy said hastily.

Wilbur switched the station without any further questions, to Tommy's relief. The news was abandoned in place of a witless chat show, and Tommy let his gaze drift out the window again, struggling to calm his shallow breathing and rapid heart rate. His entire body was tense with a barely withheld trembling; he was sure Wilbur had noticed, but couldn't bring himself to say anything that might reassure the man.

"Are you sure you're okay?" came the inevitable questioning. "Tommy?"

"Fine," Tommy grit out, hugging himself tighter and willing away the bitter taste in his mouth.

Why can't you face what you did? You did all that. You did that to them and you won't even let yourself think about it.

I can't.... I didn't mean to.

The car ride to the tower remained just as quiet until their arrival; Wilbur didn't sing along to anything without Tommy, but he didn't ask him any more questions, either. It was surprising how long he held himself back, being frank, but the hero finally cracked as they stepped out of the car.

"You're wearing the emerald," Wilbur pointed out, all too casual.

Tommy nodded, gently picking up the charm where it lay on his chest. For a moment it felt constricting, a cold reminder of all the walls he'd built between himself and SBI and how even then he'd managed to gain their trust; a strange sort of guilt that doing so had been wrong plucked at his heartstrings. He let his hand fall to his side again.

"Phil gave it to me," he explained quietly. "I heard we're matching?"

Wilbur raised his hand, flaunting the silver bracelet and emerald charm around his wrist with a smile. "Yeah," he said, and it didn't take long for his smile to fade again. "Listen, er, Tommy... if you ever need to talk — about anything, y'know — I always have an ear to offer."

And there it is. The inevitable.

"You're really bad at segues," Tommy mumbled, making his way towards the elevator.

Wilbur followed him with haste. "You're avoiding the topic."

"You're avoiding how much you suck at segues."

Wilbur sighed. "Okay, I suck, there. Now your turn."

"Okay," Tommy replied coolly. "If I need to talk to you, I will."

Wilbur blinked. "Do you need to talk to me?"

Tommy hesitated. "No."

"Are you sure?"

"Wilbur, I don't want to talk," Tommy snapped, whirling around. Wilbur startled a little, and Tommy stepped back, guilt already pooling in his stomach. "I *can't*."

"I can help you," Wilbur said carefully. "We all can."

Tommy shook his head. "Not with this."

"I don't even know what this is!"

"I know," Tommy mumbled. He turned back to the elevator, pressing the button to call it down. "That's the problem."

Phil and Techno seemed to be just as concerned when they greeted him that morning, though thankfully neither of them were as pushy as Wilbur was about asking questions. Tommy had a feeling they thought he was still sick; Phil encouraged breaks more frequently than usual all day, and he didn't miss the intent stares they shot his way at mealtimes when they thought he wasn't looking. Tommy didn't mind them worrying and tending to his every need provided they didn't question him. It lifted his spirits, even by a fraction, to just spend the day in their company again, able to distract his thoughts while he focused on his work. He found, as the hours crept by, that he didn't really want to go home at all. Returning to a silent apartment, Ranboo being away at his interview, was an unsettling idea.

Nevertheless, it was eight o'clock before he knew it. He had buried himself in as much paperwork as he could find, sitting with Phil in his office, when Wilbur came knocking.

"Are you ready to go, Tommy?" the hero called. Met with silence, he pushed the door open further, stepping into the room.

Tommy winced, meeting his gaze only for a split second before busying himself again. "I'm not finished the paperwork," he said quickly. "I just need a bit more time."

"You can finish it tomorrow, mate, it's no problem," Phil chimed in. "It's not urgent or anything."

"I'm not in any rush, it's okay," Tommy argued.

"You don't need to work overtime," Phil said softly, and then his eyebrows knitted together, creasing his forehead with concern. "Do you? Is your pay not covering everything?"

"No, it's fine, D— Phil — it's perfect, really," Tommy insisted, heart beating harder against his ribs as an unwelcome panic began to set in. "It's not that."

"Do you not want to go home?" Wilbur asked, eyes narrowing.

"No," Tommy said quickly. "I just...." He sighed, trying to calm the nervous jitters in his hands. "My roommate's not home tonight, and I...."

Phil's expression softened. "You...?"

"I don't want to be alone," Tommy admitted, voice barely above a whisper. He turned his head away, cheeks flushing. Primes, no wonder they thought he was a child, acting like that

"Okay," Phil said, nodding in understanding. Tommy glanced at him, surprised. "That's alright. We can—"

"You can spend the night again!" Wilbur suggested, face lighting up.

Tommy blinked. "I don't want to bother—"

"You won't be bothering us at all, mate," Phil said with a chuckle. "Really. You're more than welcome to stay."

"Yeah, we can watch a movie again," Wilbur enthused. "Or we have video games, if you'd like."

Tommy couldn't deny that the idea of staying over at the tower again was an enticing one. He hadn't touched a video game in years; though most importantly, he would have company the rest of the night. He wouldn't be alone with his thoughts. He had no idea when Ranboo would arrive home again, and the thought of waiting by himself in their dark and dingy apartment made his lungs constrict.

Slowly, he nodded. And then smiled. "Okay. I'll stay."

Wilbur's grin widened. "Great, I'll grab Techno. We can start setting up the console, I think we have time for games and a movie."

He was gone again in an instant. Tommy gently set the stack of papers to the side, the smile lingering on his face. Maybe things wouldn't be so bad.

Phil grinned at him, laying a hand on Tommy's shoulder. "Better not keep them waiting. Do you need pajamas?"

"Yeah, but I can get them later," Tommy replied. He knew Wilbur wouldn't let him fall asleep without them; he had insisted on it last time. He smiled at Phil. "Thanks for letting me stay."

"Anytime," Phil answered, beaming. "Really. We all love having you over."

Tommy grinned, a warmth blossoming in his chest that eased some of the pressure that had been stuck there the past couple of days. He stood once Phil did, and they followed where Wilbur had disappeared, back to the living area. He and Techno were already fiddling with the television, and glanced up as Phil and Tommy approached.

"You're staying the night?" Techno asked, a grin lighting up his features. Tommy nodded. "Good."

Tommy paused, recalling the offer Techno made to Theseus to come back with him to the tower that night. The promise that they would help him. He didn't want to talk; didn't want to admit the truth, either. But did those things come hand in hand?

They were helping enough just by letting him stay. He didn't want to ask for more than that... *didn't deserve more.*

"You ever played Mario Kart?" Wilbur asked with a grin.

Tommy raised an eyebrow. "'Course I have," he replied with a playful scoff. Sure, it had been a while since he had touched a video game — probably not since foster care — but he liked to think he remembered the controls well enough. "Everyone's played Mario Kart."

"The question is if you play it well," Techno added with a smirk that seemed aimed specifically at Wilbur.

Wilbur made a face in response. "Just because you're a tryhard—"

"Boys," Phil chided with a warm smile. "Please don't fight over Mario Kart again."

"Hey, this is mild," Wilbur retorted playfully. "Remember the arguments over Uno?"

"Which is impossible to play anymore, because *somebody* stained all the cards blue," Techno added.

Tommy laughed at the embarrassment that quickly settled as a blush in Wilbur's cheeks; he knew from games with Ghostbur that it could occasionally be difficult to tell what colour the card was supposed to be. His smile dropped fractionally at the reminder of Ghostbur. He missed him.

Wilbur's words turned out to be true as they got the game set up and began playing a few races; his and Techno's banter had been very mild compared to the frustrated yelling that currently filled the room. It took Tommy a couple goes to fully recall the controls, but he was proud to say he hadn't lost much of his skill as he kept pace with Techno, currently sitting in third place.

"Did you just *fucking blue shell me?! On lap three?!'*"

Second place.

"L," Techno deadpanned, taking the lead.

Wilbur looked fit to throw a tantrum as he was passed out by countless other characters, too close to the finish line to recover his place. "I was in *first!* That's the first time I've been in first the whole game!"

"See, you should just stay in your lane," Techno jeered light-heartedly. "Back in fifth place."

"You never get blue shells and you're always in first! And fifth?! I'm in *eighth fucking place* —"

Tommy laughed as his character crossed the line, solidifying his silver placing behind Techno. Wilbur was on the edge of his seat, leaning so far forward as he aggressively jammed the accelerate button on his wheel that he was in danger of falling off the couch. When he finally finished, securing sixth place, he accidentally let the wheel phase through his hands in frustration. As he bickered the rules of Mario Kart with Techno, Phil cheered.

"Hey, I didn't come last!"

Tommy grinned, finally forgetting some of his woes as he let himself be swept away by the arguing of the heroes and victory music from the Wii — he hadn't wanted SBI to see him that day, but he was glad he stayed. The only issue left to face was actually going to sleep; but sleep was easy enough to fake.

Eventually, Phil left at Sam's call, leaving Wilbur and Techno to mind Tommy until he returned. The pair didn't mind at all, of course; after a couple more competitive games of Mario Kart, they decided to rest their thumbs and put on the movie.

"My pick tonight," Techno reminded them cheerfully.

"As long as it's not Babe," Wilbur grumbled, still sour over his repeated losses in Mario Kart. "Charlotte's Web is much better."

"You just say that because the pig's name is Wilbur," Techno scoffed.

"Yeah, and I think that's a valid reason," Wilbur said, pushing himself to his feet. "Come on, Tommy, I'll get you some pajamas."

Tommy stood as well, raising an eyebrow at the man. "Not planning on sleeping already, are you?"

Wilbur made a face. "I'd rather not, but I'm fucking exhausted."

"Ghostbur still giving you grief?" Techno asked, and Tommy's stomach dropped.

Wilbur nodded with a grimace. "Headache's not so bad anymore, but I'm living off of pain meds. And sleeping like shit, until he owns up to whatever the fuck he's hiding from me."

Tommy's heart panged. He knew Ghostbur was keeping his identity safe, and he'd been grateful for that, even if it had fucked up their entire relationship. He hadn't considered what it was doing to Wilbur; that he was suffering as long as Tommy kept the truth from him. He was really going to ruin everything, wasn't he — whether or not he kept the truth hidden.

"Tommy?" Wilbur called, pulling him out of his thoughts. "Come on."

Tommy followed Wilbur to his room; it was a space he didn't spend much time in, but everything about it was so *Wilbur*. His guitar hung on the wall, alongside several records and band posters. He had a small fish tank in the corner, with cool neon lighting and several colourful fish; sheet music littered the floor alongside clothes that hadn't been put away.

Wilbur grabbed pajamas from a chest of drawers, tossing them to Tommy. Just like the first time he'd stayed over, they were far too big and would swamp him, but he didn't really mind. He appreciated the gesture regardless.

"You can change in here, I'll head back to the couch," Wilbur said, making his way towards the door.

Something sharp and heavy tugged at Tommy's chest. He stepped forward, biting his cheek. "Wil?"

Wilbur paused, glancing back at him. "Yeah?"

Tommy swallowed. "Is it hurting you? Ghostbur?"

"I mean, yeah," Wilbur replied with a shrug. "But it's nothing I can't handle. Don't worry about me."

Tommy stayed quiet, only nodding. He didn't know what he wanted to say, or how to make it better; guilt sat heavy in his heart and he lacked the courage to take the steps that would relieve it.

"You wouldn't know what he's hiding, would you?" Wilbur asked, genuinely curious, and Tommy's heart stopped. "I know he wasn't letting me see your apartment, because he was there and I don't remember it. Do you know why?"

No more lies. You said that.

Tommy took a breath. "I asked him not to."

Wilbur blinked, confused. "Why?"

"I didn't want you to see it," Tommy mumbled, and that was at least a half-truth. "Because.... Well, you know what it looks like now. I didn't want you to see how bad it was."

Wilbur's expression softened, and he stepped closer, away from the door. "It's not bad, Tommy."

Tommy quirked an eyebrow. "Don't lie."

A hint of a grin twitched in Wilbur's lips. "Okay, well, it's not great. But it could be worse."

Tommy stared at him, and Wilbur laughed.

"Alright, yeah, it's pretty bad. But you don't have to hide things like that from me."

If only you knew. Tommy let his gaze drop. "I don't want you to worry."

"Of course I'm gonna worry," Wilbur murmured, "I'm always gonna worry. It's what friends do."

Tommy startled, looking up again. Wilbur smiled at him.

"Come on, I think we're well past coworkers," the hero chuckled. "Get dressed."

Tommy smiled back. "Yeah, yeah. Get out of here, man."

When he returned to the living area, Wilbur was already yawning, stretched out in his spot on the couch donning his own pajamas. Techno had put some sort of movie on that Tommy didn't yet pay much attention to, taking his seat next to Wilbur and bringing his knees to his chest. He'd kept the emerald on, tucked under his shirt. It made him feel safer; *they* made him feel safer. Like he was worth something. Like he belonged.

"Your blue is fading," Wilbur murmured, squinting at Tommy as he reached out a hand to gently trace the faint remains of Ghostbur's stains.

"Yeah, Ghostbur hasn't been in touch," Tommy admitted quietly.

Wilbur frowned, and even Techno glanced over inquisitively.

"You plan on going to sleep early and remedying that?" the hybrid teased, though soft concern lay beneath his smile.

Wilbur shrugged, too tired for a witty retort. "Maybe," he said truthfully. "Might sort out Ghostbur's latest issue."

Tommy frowned, hugging his knees a little tighter to himself. He knew it likely wouldn't solve anything; Ghostbur didn't want to see him and definitely wouldn't be staining him with any more blue. It would only leave Wilbur and Techno more confused, but that was inevitable. There was no point trying to avoid it.

"Are you okay?" Wilbur asked, nudging him.

Tommy nodded. "Just tired."

Wilbur pulled him closer into his side. "Sleep if you want," he said with a yawn. "No pressure to watch the movie. Techno picked it, so it probably sucks."

"Karate Kid is a great movie. You're just sour you can't win Mario Kart," Techno snorted.

He was met with a glare. "I was letting Tommy beat me."

"By three whole places?" Tommy teased, and yelped as Wilbur pulled him over and ruffled his hair.

"I will not take slander from a child."

"I'm not a fuckin' child—"

"A gremlin, then."

Tommy gave up trying to argue, folding his arms and pouting until Wilbur released him with a chuckle.

It wasn't long into the movie that Wilbur dozed off, slumped into his corner of the couch. Tommy wouldn't have noticed, if it weren't for Ghostbur's appearance; he was hit with a train of nerves as the pale figure stared at him, conflicted and fidgety, but Ghostbur didn't stay long enough to exchange words, immediately leaving via phasing through the floor. Techno sat up to observe the brief interaction, eyebrows furrowing in befuddlement.

"Primes, maybe there is something wrong with him," he muttered. "Unlike him, not to stick around."

Tommy only nodded in anxious agreement, suddenly all too aware that it was just him and Techno awake in the room. The weight of a conversation that needed to be had bore down on his shoulders like a bag of bricks; his lungs felt as though they were in a vice grip.

He needed to know. Did he need to know? He wasn't Theseus anymore, he was done; he didn't have to keep lying to them. There was no reason he had to let it out *now*. He could live the rest of his life without any of that guilt or stress hanging over him like a dark cloud.

Couldn't he...?

Even though Ghostbur would have to hide it forever and Wilbur was hurting, even though he'd told them he was human and not enhanced and he'd come in with so many injuries that they'd never know the truth behind. Even though he had hurt people, hurt people badly, and Techno had promised help and safety and given him all the clues that he knew Tommy's secret.

But if he knew, why hadn't he said anything? Why let Tommy wallow in what-ifs and the anxiety of not knowing who he could trust?

"I also want you to know that I'm not gonna pressure you into saying anything." Techno's words that morning rang in his head; he'd said that to him the first time he had stayed over at the Watchtower. Was he really so determined to stay true to that? Was it for Tommy's sake that he had stayed quiet?

Tommy swallowed hard, gears turning in his head. The movie was merely a forgotten blur of voices and sound in the background as he thought hard on his situation.

A part of him was bitter that Techno, if he really did know — and Tommy was still only *almost* certain — hadn't reached out and just straight out told Tommy that he knew. But that implied that the part of Tommy that wished he'd done so... wanted that opportunity to be open with Techno. And maybe a part of him did. Maybe he did want someone to hold him again and tell him it was alright, that heroes made mistakes and that it wasn't his fault — and maybe that was selfish, but maybe it was true. Maybe he would feel less guilty about abandoning Theseus if he had someone to tell; someone who could protect the districts in his absence.

Maybe he wanted someone to know him, the real him, all of him... and still care for him regardless. To let him know that it was at least possible.

"Techno...."

He was interrupted by Ghostbur rocketing up through the floor so suddenly that Tommy nearly jumped out of his skin. The pale figure was frantic as he glanced around the room, hands staining the sleeves of his yellow sweater with a white-knuckled grip.

"Ghostbur?" Techno called, straightening in his seat. "Is something wrong?"

"I need to wake him up," Ghostbur insisted, voice panicky. Tommy stared worriedly. "I need to — he'll know what to do."

"What's happening?" Techno asked. "Ghostbur?"

"No time, I can't — can't—"

"Ghostbur?" Tommy spoke up quietly.

"I'm letting him remember," Ghostbur said, and met Tommy's gaze. "Some of it. Just so he knows what to do."

Tommy's heart stopped; he barely registered Ghostbur's movement as the man continued to move around the floor at speed.

"What... what do you mean?"

Ghostbur didn't reply. He had picked up a glass vase from a shelf and without another word, smashed it on the ground beside Wilbur's head; the hero shot up with a yelp and the ghost vanished.

Tommy stared, eyes wide and heart beating immeasurably fast in his chest.

"Wilbur?" Techno questioned. "Do you know what the fuck that was about?"

Wilbur was still waking up, rubbing at his eyes as he hunched over in his seat. "Still foggy," he mumbled. "It's... ah, fuck. A vigilante, I think."

Tommy couldn't have spoken if he tried. An icy terror had taken his breath away; he could barely process what was happening.

Wilbur pushed himself to his feet with a sigh. "Yeah. It's a vigilante. Not a good one, I'm pretty sure — if Ghostbur's this upset, it can't be good news."

"You going after it?" Techno asked, raising an eyebrow.

"I guess I have to," Wilbur sighed.

"You want back-up?"

Wilbur shot his teammate an unimpressed stare. "I can handle it."

"I'm giving you 'til the end of the movie, and then I'm coming after you. Is it far?"

"Thirteenth. I'll be back within the hour."

"Better be," Techno grumbled. "Interrupting the best part."

Tommy glanced at the TV screen, slow relief seeping through his body as Wilbur didn't instantly attack him. "*Wax on, wax off*," some old man was saying.

"Yeah," Wilbur remarked dryly. He stretched, making his way to the elevator. "I'll be back in a bit."

Tommy watched the hero leave with a tightness in his chest that had yet to fully relax. If Ghostbur was merely letting Wilbur remember information that didn't relate to Tommy, why had the warning felt so cryptic? But clearly he hadn't told Wilbur about his identity as a vigilante, because surely Tommy would have been immediately confronted if that was the case.

He set that aside for the moment; if Ghostbur had let Wilbur know something, he couldn't take it back. He still had time to talk to Techno.

It took him nearly the rest of the movie to build himself up to it again.

"Techno," he started again, heart pounding in his chest. He had moved to sit beside the hybrid after Wilbur had left, which he wasn't sure had made things better or worse.

Techno, still engrossed in the movie, just hummed in acknowledgement.

Tommy took a shaky inhale. *Here goes nothing.*

"Do you know?"

Techno was silent and unmoving for a long moment. Tommy ignored the way his stomach was tying itself into knots.

"Know what?" he asked carefully.

Tommy swallowed, staring up at the hero. Techno met his gaze very briefly, looking away again.

"You know what," Tommy whispered.

Techno didn't reply immediately, though he certainly wasn't paying attention to the movie anymore. "Tommy, I—"

He was interrupted with a sudden beeping from Tommy's phone. Tommy leapt from his seat to reach for it where it was buzzing on the coffee table; there was only one alert he had set to that urgent tone, and hearing it go off made Tommy's blood run cold.

"What's that?" Techno asked, pausing the movie.

Tommy could barely grasp his phone, hands trembling. "Ranboo's emergency alert."

"Ranboo?" Techno echoed, eyebrows pinching together in confusion.

"My roommate," Tommy explained shakily, scrambling to his feet. "He's in trouble."

"Hey, where are you going?" Techno asked, also rising from the couch.

Tommy's mind was running a mile a minute with all the different scenarios that could have happened. Had he been attacked? Was he ender-walking? Ranboo was supposed to be at his interview, how had things gone wrong?

"I have to help him," he explained hastily. "I have to — oh Primes—"

He tripped over his own feet in a rush to skirt around the coffee table, only avoiding whacking his chin off of the floor as Techno caught him around the waist.

"Easy, kid, you wanna explain what's going on?"

Tommy whirled around, eyes wide and sick to his stomach. "I don't have time, Tech—"

"You're no help to him in this state," Techno pointed out seriously. "I'll come with you. Just let me know what's going on."

We don't have time for this, Tommy thought, alarms blaring in his head. Nonetheless, Techno's grip on him was still secure, and it was clear the hero wasn't letting him go anywhere. He took a trembling inhale, nodding.

"I made a button for him, like — like in Theseus' suit," he said, nearly stumbling over his own words in his hurry. "He loses control sometimes — part of his hybrid background, or his enhancement, we don't know — he hurts people, or himself." A thought crossed his mind, and he met Techno's gaze with a wide-eyed stare. "Never me though, not me — that's not what I'm saying—"

"You made the button so he could call for help if he lost control," Techno said, and Tommy nodded. "And you think that's what's happened now?"

"He wouldn't press it for no reason," Tommy insisted. A horrifying thought made him freeze up; what if those Egg fuckers had got him? They'd said they would go after people close to Tommy — fuck, he never should have let Ranboo go alone — and he was so caught up with his own mistakes and guilt that he'd stupidly let it slip his mind. "Tech — we have to go—"

"Where is he?" Techno asked.

For the first time, Tommy paid more than a split second's attention to his phone and acknowledged the location that had been pinged. He was left confused; it didn't make sense.

"That can't be right," he murmured, staring at the screen as if looking at it long enough would change it to something more reasonable. "He's... he's in first."

Even Techno seemed startled, gently taking the phone to examine the map. "He's right outside the tower," he noted, and then something clicked in his expression. "Oh shit."

Tommy didn't follow. "Techno?"

Techno handed his phone back, already hurrying towards the elevator. "We need to go."

That wasn't helping Tommy's panic. He darted after him, cold fear surging through his veins. "Techno?!"

He just managed to slip through the elevator doors in time before they closed. Techno's brow was creased in heavy thought as he pressed the button for the ground floor.

"Reception?" Tommy questioned, still lost. "We're in our pajamas—"

"Barely anyone is here at this hour," Techno murmured.

"But — I need to help Ranboo, where are we going?"

Techno swallowed. "I suspect we'll see if I'm right in a minute."

After a short eternity, the doors finally opened to the chaos that was unfolding on the ground floor. Phil was already on the scene, wings held high and tense as he hurried over to the tower's main entrance; Wilbur was storming through the doors at the same time, blood dripping generously from his forehead and eyes dark with anger.

"Lucky I'm bringing you here and not prison," he spat, turning to acknowledge whoever he was dragging in after him.

"Wilbur!" Phil called at the same time, voice high and worried. "You said you got a vigilante?"

Wilbur tugged his captive forward with a rough pull of their wrist to answer the question, and Tommy's heart stopped for the fifth time that night. He could recognise the tall, lanky figure from a mile away. His patchy skin was tear-streaked as he stumbled in the door after Wilbur, eyes wide and fearful; his ears were pinned back and tail lashing in agitation.

"Ranboo?"

Chapter End Notes

okay so its been two weeks. thats on me but also on dbh for being a banger game,,, i played it for the first time recently and im currently on my third playthrough. it occupies my every waking thought what can i say

also apologies if this chapter reads weird at all, i am quite sick from my second dose of the vaccine and i edited this in a fever induced delirium at 4am and im too tired to reread it again lmao

Brothers

Chapter Summary

Wilbur has arrested Ranboo and brought him to the Watchtower, under the impression that he is a vigilante. Tommy has a lot of things to clear up with SBI, and fast.

CW// descriptions of injury

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for [notes](#)

"Ranboo?" Wilbur echoed, head snapping in Tommy's direction. "Isn't that — wait, you know this guy?"

Tommy had yet to tear his gaze away from Ranboo's teary expression of distress. "What did you do to him?!"

"What did *I* do to *him*?" Wilbur parroted, bewildered. "Have you seen my head?"

"I'm sorry," Ranboo sobbed, wrist still caught in Wilbur's grasp. "I didn't mean to, please—"

"I've heard enough from you," Wilbur seethed.

Tommy jumped forward to defend his roommate, anger quick to spark where there had been confusion and panic. He didn't know what had happened to Ranboo, or why Wilbur had brought him in, but he'd be damned if he let his roommate get hurt — at least, any more than he already was.

"Don't fucking touch him," he snapped.

Wilbur glanced at Tommy, completely baffled. "Tommy—?"

"Let go of him!" Tommy shouted, and Wilbur, startled, did so. Ranboo stumbled forward into Tommy's arms, relying on the support to keep himself upright.

"Mate, your head, are you alright?" Phil asked, stepping forward to tend to Wilbur.

"Fine," Wilbur insisted, despite dripping blood onto the clean floor. "Can we sort out this—" he gestured vaguely to Ranboo and Tommy with a pained expression, "first?"

Tommy ignored him for the time being, rubbing a circle into Ranboo's back as the hybrid slowly settled his panicked breathing. His height made the comforting embrace a little awkward, but Tommy didn't care. Whatever it took to help Ranboo, he'd do it in a heartbeat.

"Are you okay? Are you hurt?" he asked, pulling back just enough to register the expression on Ranboo's damp face. "What happened?"

"I'm not hurt," Ranboo stammered softly. His heterochromic eyes were wide and watery as he reluctantly met Tommy's gaze. "I can't remember exactly — I think it happened again, Tommy, I didn't mean any of it — I don't know what happened—"

"Breathe," Tommy whispered, cutting him off. "We don't know for sure if you're ender-walking. Do you remember the interview?"

"I was just going home from it," Ranboo recounted shakily, "and then — and then there's a block, I can't remember — and then Ghostbur was there, hero Ghostbur, and he said – he said he was *arresting* me—"

Tommy frowned, recalling actual Ghostbur's sudden reappearance earlier and his panic to wake up Wilbur. Had all that been for Ranboo? Had he been checking on him? "You didn't see Ghostbur at all? *Ghost* Ghostbur?"

Ranboo shook his head, glancing warily at Wilbur. "Just *him*."

Wilbur fixed the hybrid with an unimpressed stare, holding a hand to the wound on his head. "He's leaving out the part where he tried to kill me."

Ranboo faltered, shoulders sagging. Before Tommy could spit fire at Wilbur for the accusation, however, Techno stepped in.

"Let's not make any brash assumptions—"

"Assumptions?!" Wilbur echoed, glaring at his teammate. "Easy for you to say, Technoblade, he wasn't trying to rip *your* fucking head off!"

Ranboo looked as though he was on the verge of tears again. "I didn't mean to, I wasn't — I don't—"

Tommy winced; he didn't think Wilbur would lie about being attacked, even with his flair for dramatics. But he knew Ranboo, and trusted him. He wouldn't harm a fly in his right mind — but that meant he had indeed enderwalked, and that was something he knew Ranboo would beat himself up over for weeks, at a minimum. A part of him might have laughed at the cruel irony; life really did have it out for the two of them. Maybe they could bond even closer over the shared trauma of hurting people accidentally.

"That wasn't you," he assured Ranboo.

"Okay, do you wanna clear up what the fuck happened, then?" Wilbur snapped. "How do you even know this guy?"

Tommy shot the hero with a glare. "This is my roommate, dickhead!"

Wilbur's expression instantly dropped and Tommy registered that given the assumptions his employers had already made about Ranboo, maybe now hadn't been the best time to drop that on them. In his defence, he hadn't had much choice.

"That's your roommate?" Wilbur asked, dangerously calm.

"Hey, he's a person, first off," Tommy retorted, bristling. "With a name."

"I thought your roommate was twenty," Phil mused aloud, brow pinching in confusion.

Tommy winced as Ranboo glanced curiously at him. *Oh yeah.* "Okay, so, remember when I said I was eighteen—"

"That's your roommate?" Wilbur repeated, incredulous. "We are *not* just gonna brush past that."

"I don't see what there is to discuss on the matter," Tommy said hotly, unleashing a fierce glare on the hero. They were *not* going to have this conversation. Not again, not in front of Ranboo.

"Only the fact that he viciously attacked me!" Wilbur snapped, refusing to back down. "And didn't he just lose his job? He's clearly a violent individual, and you mean to say you've been living with him?"

"He's not fucking violent!" Tommy yelled, vision going red. Vaguely, he recalled that he needed to keep his magic in check. "You don't know shit about him!"

"I know he tried to kill me, and I know you show up with a new injury every other day—"

"Wilbur," Techno cut in sharply, before Tommy's anger had the chance to peak. "Shut the fuck up."

Wilbur blinked in surprise as his teammate stepped between him and Tommy, staring in bewilderment at the hybrid. "Techno?"

"Let Tommy explain, you're not even giving him space to breathe," Techno snapped. "Primes, if you want to sort this out, you need to cool it."

Wilbur huffed, folding his arms. He set his jaw as his gaze flickered in Tommy and Ranboo's direction, and he nodded. "Alright, fine. Start talking."

Tommy took a shaky inhale, letting the power under his skin settle to a safe level again as his rage steadily dwindled. He would rather ensure Ranboo was safe and calm before having to explain everything he knew in the lobby of his workplace at whatever time of night it was, but he hadn't been given much choice. He gave Ranboo's arm a squeeze to silently check in on him before addressing Wilbur again.

"Yeah, this is my roommate," he began coldly. "And no, he's not twenty, that was a lie. He didn't mean to attack you, Wilbur, he..." He paused, glancing sideways to meet Ranboo's still-teary gaze. He didn't want to say it aloud, but it was really the only explanation they'd been left with. "We dunno is it part of his enhancement, or because he's a hybrid, but he... he's not in control of himself sometimes, and if he gets upset, he can lash out. We call it enderwalking."

Wilbur squinted at the pair. "Sounds like an awful convenient excuse. Is that what he's been telling you?"

Tommy grit his teeth so hard he was surprised they didn't crack. "What the fuck, man?!"

"I'm just saying—"

"Wil," Phil chimed in softly, interrupting the man. "Look at him."

And Wilbur did, properly observing his attacker for likely the first time all night. He startled a little, stepping back with a tight expression. For some reason, this did nothing to ease Tommy's frustration; Ranboo didn't need their pity, and wasn't some poor kid to be looked down upon with sympathy. Neither of them were.

It was Ranboo who spoke up again before Tommy could launch to his defense, finally steady enough to stand on his own two feet again.

"I really am sorry," he murmured, voice still scratchy. "I don't know what I did, but I'm sorry. I swear I didn't mean any of it."

Wilbur stood in chilly silence for a long moment, regarding the teen with a conflicted glare. "You don't remember any of it?"

Ranboo shook his head wearily. "Sorry," he mumbled. He wiped at his agitated cheeks. "Was... was it bad?"

Wilbur swallowed heavily, and raised a hand to put pressure on the wound on his head. "I've survived worse."

It wasn't reassurance, but it still brought Ranboo's shoulders sagging with relief and exhaustion, and Tommy softened a fraction. He didn't allow himself to fully relax, not while everyone was still on edge, but at least their conversation had progressed from shouting.

"I'm not going to arrest you," Wilbur decided, and Ranboo really went limp at that, nearly buckling at the knees.

"Good," Tommy said, steadying his roommate and pulling him into his side. "I wasn't going to let you."

Wilbur regarded Tommy, still clad in his own oversized pajamas and emerald charm around his neck, with a curious gaze. "You two still have a lot of explaining to do, though."

"That's okay," Ranboo sighed, leaning into Tommy's side. "Thank you, Ghostbur. And sorry again."

"Just Wilbur's fine," Wilbur muttered, turning to head towards the elevator. "I'm going to go clean up."

Tommy slowly let the tension ease from his muscles as the hero left, turning towards Ranboo and pulling him into another embrace. Ranboo returned it, weary but glad as he sank into the warmth of the hug.

"Are you okay? Really?" Tommy murmured.

Ranboo's throat rumbled against Tommy's shoulder as he replied. "I don't know," he whispered. "I hope I didn't hurt him badly."

"He's fine," Tommy said. "He's trained for this stuff. You're not."

Ranboo remained in quiet contemplation for a moment, before humming another question, the vulnerability in his voice disarming. "Can we go home now?"

"Actually," Phil murmured, stepping forward to address the pair and reminding them of the two heroes still present in the room. "I was thinking maybe it would be better if you two stayed the night here. The city's dangerous at this hour, I wouldn't be comfortable letting you walk home."

Ranboo pulled away from Tommy, expression falling as he met the winged man's gaze worriedly. Phil offered the pair a reassuring smile.

"There's plenty of space on the couches," he said, "and Tommy can tell you they're comfortable. I'll be sure to keep Wilbur away from you, so he won't be a bother."

Ranboo glanced questioningly at Tommy, who nodded in return.

"It's safe here, big man," he agreed. "But if you really want to go home, we can."

Ranboo bit his cheek, gaze dropping to the ground as he debated the offer. After a second, he glanced up at Phil. "And we can leave in the morning?"

"Of course, mate, this isn't a kidnapping," Phil replied cheerily. "Though there are a couple things we'd all like to discuss. If you'd rather not, we can skip the conversation, but I think it would be beneficial for you too."

Ranboo swallowed, nodding. "Okay then."

"Okay," Tommy agreed, giving his arm a comforting squeeze. "Come on, big man."

The four headed back to the elevator, beginning a long and silent journey up to SBI's floor. Ranboo remained stuck to Tommy's side, still tense with nerves but weak with exhaustion as Tommy continued to rub silent reassurances where his hand lay on his roommate's shoulder. Phil remained in the elevator as the doors opened on floor eighty-seven.

"I'm going to make sure the lobby gets cleaned up, and I'll meet up with Wilbur," he explained with a nod, "let him know what's going on. Tech, will you get Ranboo some pajamas?"

Techno nodded wordlessly, and he guided the two teenagers into the living area as the doors closed again on Phil. "Be right back," he murmured, heading in the direction of his room.

Tommy let himself sink back into his position on the couch, Ranboo gingerly seating himself on the edge of it beside him. His shoulders were still drawn up tight.

"The emergency button," he spoke up after a moment, voice still cracked, "I don't think it'll work the way we thought."

Tommy sat up at the statement, eyebrows knitting together. "What?"

Ranboo glanced sideways at him, hands fidgeting restlessly. "I couldn't press it in time," he admitted quietly. "I don't even remember losing control. When I woke up, I... I forgot I had it until we were nearly at the Watchtower. I was freaking out, I guess."

Tommy's heart fell in time with his expression; all the work and effort he'd put into the little device, so sure it would all be worth it to offer Ranboo some comfort and prevent disaster... had all been for nothing. Disappointment lay heavy upon his shoulders.

"I'm sorry," Ranboo whispered.

"That's not — it's okay," Tommy stammered, struggling for the correct words. "I mean, it's not okay. But it's not something either of us could have helped."

He wished his head had as much faith in his words as his heart did. *You should have done better*, a part of him growled, bitter disappointment broiling with the heat of anger and upset. He struggled to ignore it.

"Here," Techno said, announcing his presence as he reentered the room with clothes thrown over an arm. "These should fit."

"Thanks," Ranboo murmured meekly, standing to take the pajamas. "Where can I...?"

"There's a bathroom in the spare room," Techno said. "I'll show you."

Tommy smiled weakly at Ranboo as Techno led his roommate towards the bedrooms. His mind was still reeling from the entire situation. This was Ranboo's second incident in the

space of a few weeks; before all of this he hadn't enderwalked in... Primes, years, probably. What was setting it off? Was it connected to the issues Tommy had been facing? The Egg? And fuck, there was an ungodly amount of lies and false information he had to clear up between SBI and Ranboo regarding pretty much everything they thought they knew about his roommate. Wilbur had already dared imply the worst right in front of him; the thought made Tommy both sick to his stomach and hot with rage. How could he say such things, even think them?

"You okay, Tommy?" Techno's drawling voice called. "You're makin' faces."

Tommy whipped around; the hero was leaning against the doorway to the room. "Where's Ranboo?"

"Getting dressed," Techno replied. "Relax, I didn't do anything to him."

Tommy eased some tension from his shoulders, though when he met Techno's gaze again, it was with no less urgency. "He's not hurting me, Tech. I know what it looks like, and I know I've been really shit with lying and — and the injuries, but you've gotta believe me. It's not fair on him, he didn't do anything—"

"I know," Techno said evenly. "I believe you."

Tommy took a breath. "Then you gotta help me tell Phil and Wilbur," he insisted. "Ranboo's done nothing, it's not — he can't take the fall for something he would never do, not when I was the one making shitty excuses."

"I'll help you," Techno agreed, and Tommy sagged with relief.

"Thank you."

The soft patter of reluctant footsteps on carpet signaled Ranboo's return, and the two let their conversation end. Techno gestured to Tommy's couch, encouraging Ranboo to join his friend,

and then dimmed the lights with the switch on the wall.

"Are you staying?" Tommy asked the hero, unsure which answer he would prefer.

Techno nodded. "Just to keep an eye on you two." He took a seat on the other couch, retrieving his phone from the pocket of his pajama bottoms. "If you need anything, just let me know."

Tommy nodded, sitting back into the couch as Ranboo curled up beside him, bringing his knees to his chest. Techno's pajamas fit him better than Wilbur's fit Tommy.

"I don't think I can sleep," he admitted, voice hushed.

Tommy nodded. "Me neither."

Ranboo hugged himself a little tighter. "What am I gonna do, Tommy?"

Tommy wished he knew how to respond. He was fretting over the same question.

"What if this keeps happening?" Ranboo whispered, words trembling. "I can't... keep hurting people, I...."

"We'll figure it out," Tommy murmured, as confidently as he could manage. Somehow, the emptiness of the words made him feel even more helpless. He was tired of living at the mercy of the universe.

Ranboo didn't reply, though leaned into him as if to show appreciation for the attempt to comfort him. They sat in the quiet for a while longer, broken only by the odd yawn or Techno clearing his throat. The hero was scrolling lazily on his phone, giving them the space they needed.

"I keep trying to remember," Ranboo admitted after some time, "what happened. Or at least what happened before I...."

He trailed off, so Tommy picked up for him. "You said you were on the way home."

"Yeah," Ranboo whispered. "Thirteenth. I hadn't been walking long, I don't think."

"Do you remember where exactly you were?"

He shrugged, but then paused, contemplative. "Yeah... actually, I think I do. I remember passing the library. After that would have been a barber's place, but... I don't think I remember walking past that on the way back."

"Were you alone?" Tommy asked quietly.

Ranboo's forehead creased in thought. "Yes...? Wait no, no. There was somebody coming against me."

Tommy inhaled sharply. "Do you remember what they looked like?"

Ranboo's face was tense as he prodded at his own memories, but ultimately he shook his head with a sigh. "No. I don't remember seeing their face."

"That's okay," Tommy murmured. "Hey, maybe tomorrow I can get Phil or someone to see if they can get any footage from there. Maybe CCTV or something caught what happened."

Ranboo tensed beside him. "I don't know if I want to see that."

"You don't have to," Tommy assured him. "But it might help us figure out if it was an accident or not."

"Why wouldn't it be an accident?" Ranboo asked, glancing sideways at Tommy with a newfound urgency.

Tommy's heart skipped a beat. He hadn't told Ranboo about the cryptic warning he had received about the Egg, had he? He bit his cheek, debating on warning him now — but fuck, Ranboo was already a state and he didn't want to worry him any further. Especially not with that.

"I don't know," he deflected quickly. "I thought... just in case, y'know. It could at least help us figure out what set it off."

Ranboo nodded, accepting his explanation with a glum expression.

"Maybe if there's something that caused it, we'll be able to prevent it," Tommy added, in a bid to bring some hope to the situation. "You haven't lost control in so long, and now twice so recently? Maybe it's not a coincidence."

"Maybe you're right," Ranboo muttered. He let his eyes drift closed, leaning closer against Tommy. "But regardless... I can't rely on it being something preventable."

Tommy blinked away the drowsiness in his vision. "What do you mean?"

Ranboo's weight shifted again beside him. "I... I can't take the job. And maybe... maybe I shouldn't stay with you until we can be sure I'm safe."

Tommy straightened, heart sinking. "You *are* safe, Ranboo, I trust you."

"I don't even trust me," Ranboo admitted, voice threatening to break. "It's for the best."

"No," Tommy argued. "I'm not leaving you alone. I don't care if it's dangerous, it's *you*."

"Tommy—"

"Nope," Tommy retorted with finality. "We stick together. *Always*."

Ranboo fell quiet, and then let his head rest against Tommy's, exhaling a tense breath. "Thank you," he whispered.

"Of course," Tommy replied softly. "You're my brother."

He let himself relax into the warmth at his side, pulling the blanket up over the two of them as exhaustion slowly made itself more apparent. He meant what he'd said; he didn't care if Ranboo ended every day of his life from now on — he wasn't leaving him. He knew firsthand how taxing being left alone to deal with your own thoughts and emotions was, and he would die before letting anyone else go through that. Especially Ranboo.

He wasn't sure when sleep finally overtook him, though it was a light and restless one. Voices and visions and dreams overlapped in a disorienting mess of colours and sounds; he couldn't entirely differentiate between what he was overhearing in the real world and what was in his head.

"You let him stay? He's dangerous, Phil, what were you thinking?"

"Do you still hear their screams, Tommy? How can you live with yourself knowing what you did to them?"

"Tommy trusts him, so I trust him. Look at them, Wil—"

"Do you even regret it? Did you feel any guilt?"

"What if he hurts Tommy? We would have let him!"

"Who will you hurt next? You'll never save them all. You'll fail every time."

"Techno is watching them, they're both safe. Go to bed, we'll talk in the morning."

The voices eventually gave way for a deeper, more unpleasant slumber. Violent, angry images plagued his mind; the worst part was the underlying truth in each of them. They were memories, twisted and unrecognisable but real and haunting.

He was in the cinema, the one that had exploded, but he was staring at himself, bloodied and red-eyed and grinning so wide that his cheeks began to tear. In his grasp was the body of the kid he'd failed to save, even more broken and burned, head hanging limply out of sight until the other Tommy threw the body at his feet and it was *Ranboo*, eyes glassy and unseeing and blood trickling endlessly from his mouth and nose. Tommy stumbled back in horror and fear, but he couldn't run — his arms and legs were frozen, shackled by his own magic, and then the ceiling opened up to collapse and he was pinned to the floor again and he could see the hospital through the hole in the roof, could see the explosion rock through the upper floors, could hear the screams; and he wasn't pinned to the floor anymore, or held back by magic, he could *help them* but his own powers had abandoned him and he was frozen as he watched it all unfold again, hands reaching out to him, begging him for mercy, begging him to stop, and the faces of SBI were clear behind the windows, burning up in the fire he'd put there—

"Tommy!" Ranboo called, and Tommy jolted back into the waking world with a wet face and aching eyes and throat.

"I—" he started, but his voice failed him and tears were still streaming down his cheeks and he let Ranboo wrap comforting arms around him.

"You're okay, you're safe," Ranboo whispered, carding a hand through Tommy's hair as he embraced him. "You're in the Watchtower. It was a dream."

It was real, Tommy wanted to argue, *you don't understand*. But he couldn't produce words, and letting himself fall limp into Ranboo's warm hug and gentle words was much easier.

"You're here with me, you're awake," Ranboo murmured. "Techno's here too. You're safe. We're all safe."

Tommy managed to peer over Ranboo's shoulder, watery vision still adjusting to the dark. Techno was still on the other couch, though wide awake and sat bolt upright as he stared at the pair, concerned but giving them the space they needed. He gave Tommy a reassuring nod when he met the boy's gaze.

"I thought I heard screaming," another voice piped up.

Tommy glanced to the hallway, where Wilbur was lingering by the door, reluctant and confused and concerned all at once as he took in the sight with wide eyes. Tommy registered his words a moment later and flushed in embarrassment, pulling away from Ranboo just long enough to wipe at his damp face.

"Sorry," he mumbled, trying for a chuckle that ended up sounding wet and pathetic. "Um. Bad dream."

Wilbur softened a fraction, still glancing warily between Tommy and Ranboo. "You okay?"

Tommy nodded, and wiped clumsily at his face again. Ranboo gave his shoulder a light squeeze, and he smiled appreciatively at the hybrid.

Wilbur watched them for a moment longer, and glanced at Techno. Something conflicted lay heavy on his face. He gazed at Tommy and Ranboo again before giving a curt nod. "Okay. I'm just in my room if you need anything."

Tommy nodded again, and the hero hesitantly left back down the shadowed hallway. It must have still been the middle of the night; he winced at the thought. He didn't want to have to sleep again. Ranboo and Techno were both still regarding him with expressions of pity, and something bitter curled inside of him; he shouldn't have had a nightmare, shouldn't be taking the attention away from Ranboo when it was his roommate who was struggling the most.

"Do you need to talk about it?" Ranboo asked softly, as Tommy curled up again, pointedly ignoring their stares. "It'll help."

"No," Tommy mumbled. After another beat, he glanced up at the hybrid. "Did you sleep?"

Ranboo shook his head. "Couldn't."

Tommy's guilt worsened. "I'll stay awake," he offered quietly, as if that would make anything better.

"You don't have to," Ranboo argued immediately.

Tommy just curled in on himself more, letting the *I don't want to sleep again* go unspoken. Ranboo said nothing either, only leaning into him in wordless comfort. Tommy heard Techno adjusting his position on the other couch, and assumed the hero was lying down again.

As much as Tommy fought it, sleep did eventually overcome him again, prevailing over his own exhaustion, though it came without any dreams this time. He woke again as morning light shone in through the tall windows behind him, a little better rested than he'd felt for a while. To his surprise, neither Ranboo nor Techno were with him anymore. His roommate's absence planted a seed of anxiety in his stomach, and he sat up immediately, reaching to check his phone on the coffee table. It was ten o'clock.

Ten o'clock? He hadn't been sleeping in that late since he gave up patrol. Granted, he hadn't been sleeping much at all since then.

He rose on unsteady legs as voices sounded from the kitchen, making his way towards the source of the noise. He found Techno and Ranboo seated on one side of the table, Phil and Wilbur on the other, and wasn't sure if he was more taken aback by the lack of aggression on Wilbur's part or the hint of a smile on Ranboo's face.

"So you're only seventeen?" Phil was asking.

Ranboo gave a small nod in response. "I take it Tommy told you otherwise."

"He said he was eighteen, and you were twenty," Wilbur said, remarkably calm. "We found out he was only sixteen a while ago, but he never corrected the lie about your age."

"That idiot," Ranboo replied, though there was an affectionate note to his tone. "He probably panicked. He sucks at lying."

"I'm not an idiot," Tommy argued, folding his arms, and the room's occupants turned to look at him.

"Finally out of bed?" Phil teased, raising an eyebrow.

Tommy ignored the way his cheeks flushed. Did Phil know about his nightmare? Maybe the others had forgotten. That would be most ideal.

"Oh yeah," Wilbur said, clicking his fingers as though remembering something. He gestured at Tommy, still watching Ranboo. "He told me you were his dog."

Ranboo nearly choked on the juice he was sipping at, and the heat in Tommy's cheeks grew.

"Okay," he began, hasty to defend himself, "that was less of a lie and more of a joke. It *was* funny."

"Your dog?" Ranboo echoed, spluttering. "What the hell?"

"It's a long story," Tommy replied, shooting a glare at Wilbur for bringing it up at all. "Which, speaking of stories, since when have you two been all buddy-buddy?"

"We've all been up for a while," Techno answered for him. "Ranboo's been clearing up some... misconceptions."

Tommy knew Ranboo would be careful not to let the wrong information slip, but he still had to swallow his anxiety as he met his roommate's gaze. Ranboo's eyes were relaxed as he gave Tommy a reassuring nod, and Tommy let the tension roll out of his shoulders.

"I'm glad you could sort out your differences," Tommy said awkwardly, glancing between the pair. He was grateful, at least, that there weren't going to be any more fights between them.

"We even have a few things in common," Ranboo admitted, glancing momentarily at the hero across from him. "Neither of us do particularly well with water, for one."

"Come sit down," Phil said to Tommy, beckoning him to the table. "I saved you breakfast."

Tommy squeezed between Techno and Ranboo, gratefully accepting the still-warm toast Phil had to offer. He munched away contentedly as the others continued to converse, surprised to find his appetite had returned for the morning.

"Tommy mentioned you were looking for a new job," Phil said to Ranboo, hands clasped around his coffee mug. "How's that going?"

Ranboo's smile faltered for a second. "Well, I was out at an interview last night, before...." He paused, gesturing vaguely. "Um. It went well, but... I can't take the job, so... it doesn't matter."

"Can't take the job?" Wilbur echoed, raising an eyebrow.

Ranboo shrugged, taking another awkward sip of juice. "Can't trust... um, that it won't happen again."

Wilbur fell silent. Tommy watched his reaction carefully, though the hero kept his expression irritatingly even. Phil's, on the other hand, had pinched apologetically.

"I'm sorry about that," he murmured. His wings ruffled behind him, mouth hanging open as he hesitated to speak again. "Though... I might have an offer to make you."

Ranboo perked up, eyes widening, and even Tommy paused his chewing to stare at the man curiously.

"I've been working on this program for vigilantes," Phil explained. "A training program of sorts. You'll be paid, and we'll have accommodation to offer soon enough—"

"Wait, wait," Tommy interrupted, trying not to laugh. "Ranboo's not a vigilante."

Phil blinked, surprised, and Wilbur narrowed his eyes at the two teenagers.

"That's not what Ghostbur told me," he said.

Tommy paused, wondering desperately what exactly the ghost had let slip to the hero. Ranboo nudged him subtly, and he glanced sideways at his roommate, who just shook his head before looking back to Phil.

"Nevermind," he said, smiling softly. "I'd... be interested. If you have more information."

Tommy's jaw dropped open as he stared in bewilderment at his friend. What was he doing? Ranboo had never fought someone in his life, disregarding whatever happened when he was enderwalking — he wouldn't last a week as a vigilante. It was miles too dangerous, and all to keep up whatever lie Ghostbur was feeding Wilbur to save *Tommy's* skin? It wasn't worth it. Not for him.

"Ranboo—" he started, but Phil was already launching into a lengthy spiel about the program, eyes shining with utter delight.

Ranboo glanced sideways at Tommy, expression calm and collected. Tommy stared wordlessly, though his roommate offered nothing but reassurance. He knew what he was doing, apparently.

"You won't have to worry about your — enderwalking, is it called? Everyone you'll be interacting with will either be a trained hero or another vigilante training in the program, so we won't let you hurt anyone," Phil was saying cheerfully. "Hours are very flexible, and they include training in the tower, not just patrols on the streets. You'll be assigned a mentor, and they'll supervise you at all times. What are your enhancements?"

"Teleportation is the main one," Ranboo replied. "I guess enderwalking, too. Though I'm not registered as enhanced."

"Okay," Phil said, pursing his lips in thought. "That's alright. We'll contact the power registry, just say you only recently developed enhancements."

"It's that easy?" Ranboo asked, surprised.

Phil shrugged. "They won't ask questions without official evidence to suggest you've had them longer. And I've checked your records; there's no history of criminal activity, so none of your episodes have been officially reported to police."

Ranboo paused. "You've checked my records...?"

Phil, too, froze for a second. He kept his expression calm, though couldn't prevent the flush that rose in his cheeks. "Er... when Wilbur said he was bringing in a vigilante, I thought I would look into you. See if you were appropriate for the program."

Tommy's stomach had dropped. He had a sickening feeling he knew the real reason Phil had been looking into Ranboo's records, and that it had been a lot earlier than last night. He was grateful, at least, that the winged man didn't tell Ranboo the truth.

Ranboo seemed to accept the excuse with a nod. "So when can I start?"

"There will be a good bit of paperwork to get through," Phil admitted. "You can come in with Tommy over the next few days and we'll gradually get through it. Unfortunately there is a lot of legal stuff to sort out when it comes to vigilantes."

Ranboo nodded, unsurprised.

"Then it's just a matter of finding a hero willing to mentor you, especially since you're a minor," Phil continued. "All in all, you should be able to start sometime next week."

Ranboo grinned. "Sounds good."

Phil clapped his hands together happily. "Great!" he exclaimed, and nodded to Tommy. "You don't start for another two hours, mate, so take the morning easy. If you need more time, just let me know."

"Thanks, Phil," Tommy replied, content with that.

"I have to meet with Foolish in a bit," Techno mentioned, pushing himself to his feet. "I'll be getting dressed."

Phil nodded, and turned to his other teammate. "Want to get a start on your report for last night?"

Wilbur made a face, though agreed regardless, standing after Techno. "Suppose now's a good a time as any."

Phil smiled, and left the table after him, glancing back at the teens. "I'll start prepping the paperwork for you, Ranboo," he said. "I'll be in my office if you need anything."

Ranboo nodded, murmuring his thanks as the two were left alone in the kitchen. Tommy set his toast aside for a moment, squinting at his roommate.

"So what was that about?" he demanded.

Ranboo blinked. "What?"

Tommy rolled his eyes, though there was no real aggravation behind the movement. "What?" he mocked. "The program, Ranboo. What were you thinking?"

"Ghostbur clearly told Wilbur *I* was the vigilante to protect you," Ranboo answered evenly, as though that was obvious. "You really thought breakfast was the time to lay the truth on them all?"

Tommy frowned, crossing his arms. "No, but... you didn't have to do that. I'll tell them the truth if it gets you out of this."

"Don't worry about it," Ranboo replied with a shrug. "It's also a job, and I won't have to worry as much about hurting people if I enderwalk. Besides...." He trailed off, pink rising in his patchy cheeks. "I mean... nevermind."

Tommy raised an eyebrow. "Now you've gotta tell me."

"It's nothing."

Tommy smirked, a thought crossing his mind. "Oh, I get it," he said slyly. "I didn't realise you wanted to be just like the great Philza Minecraft, huh?"

"Actually," Ranboo stammered, not quite meeting his gaze, "I'd rather be like you."

Oh. Tommy blinked, expression frozen and mouth gaping as he took in that information. A faint blush was appearing on his own face.

"You save so many people," Ranboo explained hastily, "and I know it's been hard on you recently. I know it's *always* been dangerous... but you've always been so proud of what you could do, so happy to go on patrol. I admire that more than I've said to you, and...." He hesitated, bringing his head up to meet Tommy's gaze with startling sincerity. "If I could be half the man you are, TommyInnit, I'd be proud of myself too."

Tommy's brain must have short-circuited; his mouth was opening and closing wordlessly as he struggled to grasp exactly what he was hearing. Eventually, he managed to spit out a single word: "Really?"

Ranboo smiled sheepishly. "Yeah. I mean it, man."

"I don't...." Tommy trailed off as soon as he'd started, struggling to comprehend the immense warmth blossoming in his chest and set aside the heaviness of his worst thoughts at the same time. He settled for a smile that for once, felt completely genuine. "Thank you."

"Thank *you*," Ranboo returned, and moved his hand to give Tommy's forearm a comforting squeeze. "Brothers."

Tommy's heart squeezed. "Brothers."

Chapter End Notes

sorry for the delays with chapters recently! college starts very soon for me and getting everything organised has been exhausting, there's a lot to do but hopefully things will calm down soon :) i'm still determined to finish this fic, so have no fear! thank you for your patience <3

also would like to mention rq that recent chapters and likely chapters to come have included a lot of tommy's inner thought processes and many ways of thinking and regarding himself that are not healthy. i am not trying to promote these views in any way, and advise that if you are feeling the same you should seek support. take care <3

Visitors in L'Manberg

Chapter Summary

Ranboo starts his training as a vigilante, and a familiar face visits the city.

CW// panic attacks

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for [notes](#)

In the days that followed Ranboo's sudden introduction to SBI, things finally seemed to calm down for a while. Tommy was more than relieved to settle back into a routine and do his best to forget about what had happened, even if guilt still lingered and the new routine was quite different. Ranboo joined him in going to the tower every morning when Wilbur picked them up, and Tommy was amazed to see how well the two got along now that all their misunderstandings had been sorted out. A small part of him was almost jealous, watching their interactions play out so well in spite of Wilbur thinking Ranboo was a vigilante and having such a clouded misjudgement of him before meeting him; but that was ridiculous. He was happy his friend could accompany him to the tower, and that he wasn't suffering from the horrible implications of Tommy's lies any longer.

If he was at all jealous of how quickly SBI had accepted Ranboo, even as a vigilante, he set that aside. It was his own fault that he couldn't be in the same position; it was his own fault for lying over and over until the truth was as twisted as their trust in him.

Indeed, as Phil had promised, a week later Ranboo was officially part of the program and started his training. He spent a lot less time on SBI's floor as a result, as did Techno and Wilbur, both apparently busy with a new project. Even Phil was in his office more often than not, working on something important. Tommy was left alone to find his own jobs around the place, and with nobody to follow around and bother during his break hours, he started visiting Sam in the lab again.

"So the upgraded comms system for SBI has been scrapped," Sam was explaining, happy to have Tommy around for company again and quick to catch him up on his latest projects.

"Wilbur's mic wouldn't shut off, so it drained its battery too rapidly and would shut off mid-patrol. I *could* fix it, but I'm thinking I'll start from scratch. I have a few new designs in mind for something sleeker and more compact."

"What will you do with the old comms?" Tommy inquired, looking curiously at the numerous earpieces scattered across the table in front of them.

Sam shrugged. "Set them aside for now. I might be able to repurpose them, but I've no ideas yet. I don't want to throw away good materials."

"Seems fair," Tommy remarked.

"Today I'll mainly be working on the new comms designs, if you're interested in helping with that," Sam said with a smile. He pressed a couple buttons, and a large hologram was projected above the table. "They could definitely be tweaked a bit before we start building them."

"Sure," Tommy agreed eagerly. Sam's technology never failed to leave him in awe. "I've got the whole hour anyway."

"I'm surprised you're not down watching Ranboo's training," Sam mused, quirking an eyebrow. "I would've thought you'd be much more interested in that."

"I like working in the labs," Tommy protested, and then, sighing, he admitted the real truth. "Plus, I'm not allowed. Some shit reason about privacy for the vigilantes, or whatever. As if I'm not his best friend."

"Oh," Sam hummed, drawing out the syllable as though recalling something. "I do think it was mentioned to me that they wanted to keep his mentor a secret."

Tommy blinked, bewildered. "What? Why?"

Sam only grinned, a hint of mischief in his expression. "Well, I can't say too much. You're a smart kid, you'll figure it out."

Tommy scowled, frustrated. Would it be ironic to say that people keeping secrets from him was agitating? Especially when it pertained to Ranboo; he had been assured that his roommate was fine and safe and doing well, but it was the little pieces of unknown information that planted worried doubts in his mind. He just wanted to make sure Ranboo was okay.

"He's in good hands, that's all I'll say," Sam added on as an afterthought, watching Tommy with a vaguely amused expression. "I'm sure they'll come around and let you down there soon."

They better; Tommy was about to say, but no sooner than he had opened his mouth to speak was his phone ringing. He startled, a sudden hope stirring that maybe he was going to be invited down to see Ranboo right away. He pulled out his phone. It wasn't Ranboo; though the surprise was still a pleasant enough one that his disappointment was stuffed away to be dealt with later.

"Tubbo!" he greeted cheerfully, stepping away from Sam for a few moments and smiling apologetically at the hero. "How are you, big man?"

"Tommy!" The voice on the other side of the call was buzzy with excitement. *"Tommy, I'm coming to L'Manberg!"*

Tommy's eyebrows shot up into his messy hair. "What?!"

"Dad just told me!" Tubbo explained gleefully. *"He's moving the company to L'Manberg, we'll be there in a few days!"*

Tommy beamed wide at the news, keen to see Tubbo in person again. Primes, it had been far too long since he'd first met the boy. "Fuck yeah!" he exclaimed, and then shot another apologetic glance in Sam's direction for cursing. "Big T, that's amazing!"

"I can't wait to see you," Tubbo laughed. *"We have so much to catch up on."*

Primes, Tommy could agree with that. When last had he called Tubbo? Before the whole cinema incident, at least; and that meant before both sleepovers at the Watchtower, before that argument with Ranboo, even before meeting Ghostbur. Before failing to save a kid and a hospital, and giving up Theseus. He swallowed the heavy lump of guilt in his throat.

"Yeah, we do," he settled on, not sure how much he really wanted to reveal to his friend. Not sure how much he could afford to. "You said your dad's moving the company — is that for good?"

"A couple months, at least," Tubbo replied cheerfully. "He didn't tell me much. He said he had business in L'Manberg, and when I asked he said there's a gala and then the Heroes Festival at the end of the summer."

Tommy knew about the Heroes Festival; it was an annual event in L'Manberg, in celebration of those who kept the city safe — though it was also a holiday marking the turn into autumn. All around, it was a few days of high spirits and good food and fun. He'd gone with a foster family before, and Ranboo last year, though neither time had he had enough money to take part in all the games or rides he wanted to. Nevertheless, the atmosphere of the festival was not one to be missed — and it was a great opportunity of publicity for the heroes. He supposed SBI would likely be attending this year. Maybe, as their assistant, he could go with them.

"A gala?" he decided to ask, as that was news to him.

"At the Watchtower, he said," Tubbo answered. "I thought you would've known about it."

Tommy's eyebrows rose. "No, I didn't," he mused, wondering if this was another secret being kept from him. He glanced at Sam, who was occupied entirely by the hologram in front of him. "When did he say it was?"

"Next week."

That soon? Now he was really surprised he didn't know about it yet. "Huh. I'll have to ask Phil."

"I'll be there, anyway, so I hope you can come," Tubbo said earnestly. "It'll be a lot more fun with you there. I don't know anyone else my age going, just Dad and a bunch of his business friends."

"Yeah, me too," Tommy responded. A part of him curled with unease at the thought of Schlatt being in the tower; he still hadn't forgotten the whole incident with Skeppy last time he'd seen him. If anything, he wanted to be there to keep an eye on the man — though seeing Tubbo was an added bonus.

The two chatted back and forth for a short while longer before Tubbo had to go, and the conversation left Tommy buzzing with excitement to see his friend again. They really did have a lot to catch up on, and he'd missed spending time with the boy in person. Part of his thoughts still lingered on the gala, and the discomfort brought on by the thought of Schlatt being in close quarters again, but he did his best to brush aside his wariness. It was probably going to be fine; any further drink incidents were facing Watchtower security this time, and he was sure he wasn't the only one who remembered the events in the southern city. The chances of anything happening were slim to none.

Regardless, the news of the gala provoked numerous questions. Why hadn't he heard anything of it before? What was the point of it? Were Dream and Puffy coming back? And Sapnap and George, of course - they too had been missing from the Watchtower for quite a while now.

Endlessly curious, he found himself in Phil's office later that day, after excusing himself a little early from Sam's lab. The winged man was hunched over his computer, face hidden by the screen and keys clicking rapidly as he worked away. He seemed busy, yet Tommy was undeterred; he knew Phil wouldn't mind. Everyone had a soft spot for the great TommyInnit.

"Philza Minecraft," he called, a tad dramatically, as he stepped into the office with his chest puffed out. "You will not believe what I just heard."

Phil kept his head down as Tommy planted himself into the soft chair opposite his desk, continuing to work. The only indication that he was aware of Tommy's presence at all was a

light ruffle of his wings, and a vaguely interested, "Oh?"

Tommy sniffed, a little discouraged by the lack of acknowledgement. "Well," he began, pausing for effect, "Tubbo, of all people, called me to inform me that the tower is holding a gala next week."

Another shift of his wings. "Oh, yes. I've been working out the finer details of that the past few days."

Tommy pouted. "You didn't think to tell your favourite assistant?"

That earned him a light chuckle, and Tommy grinned in triumph. "Tommy, you're my only assistant."

"Then it's a good thing I'm your favourite," Tommy joked back, and then sat back into the chair, letting his smile drop. "What, am I not invited?"

"No, you are, of course," Phil replied immediately, and finally sat back from the desktop, hands rubbing wearily at his face.

Tommy didn't miss the redness around his eyes, nor the way his eyebrows pinched together a little too tightly to be that stressed over office work. His frown deepened. "Are you alright, Phil?"

Phil chuckled, the laugh not quite reaching his tired eyes. "Yeah, I'm fine, mate. Just been distracted." His gaze drifted to the side. "Not a good day. Sorry, Tommy — it's not your fault."

Concern twisted in Tommy's gut, and he straightened, watching his employer carefully. "It's okay," he said. "I can go, if you need to be alone—"

"That's alright," Phil argued, waving away the suggestion. He met Tommy's gaze and managed a weak smile. "You remind me of her, a bit."

Tommy blinked, unsure if he was supposed to understand. "Um... who?"

"Oh. Kristin," Phil responded. His wings twitched in the brief moment of silence that followed as he debated his next words. "Today's seventeen years since she left."

Tommy's heart sank; he wasn't sure what words could do to ease that kind of ache. "She was your partner?" he assumed. Techno hadn't given him a name when they'd been looking at those photos all that time ago, but it made sense.

"Fiancée," Phil confirmed with a nod, and then leaned forward again to rest his elbows on his knees as he ran his hands over his face. Tommy's stomach twisted with sympathy. "Sorry, mate," the hybrid said again, forcing a smile. "I didn't mean to bring down your mood with my nonsense."

"It's not nonsense," Tommy contended. "You loved her, and now she's gone. Of course you'll miss her. It doesn't matter how long it's been."

Phil's smile was a tad more genuine when he met Tommy's gaze again, and Tommy's stomach settled, assured that he'd said something right. "Thank you, Tommy."

Tommy shrugged off the praise; he hadn't done much. "I miss my parents sometimes, and I didn't even know them," he admitted, with a touch of hesitance. "It's just like that sometimes. We miss people — it's how we cope."

Phil was watching him through thoughtful, appreciative eyes, and Tommy ducked his head, mildly embarrassed. He didn't usually get so genuine with people; it left him feeling raw and exposed. This time, though, it was surprisingly relieving — like reassurance that he wasn't alone in his grief, however misplaced he often regarded it. Clearly, it had been something Phil needed to hear.

"Erm, I meant to ask," he piped up again, content to change the subject as Phil's silence drew on for too long. "About Ranboo—"

"Oh, yes," Phil said, clasping his hands together and straightening his back as the words prompted him into action. "He's doing really well so far. Was very new at hand-to-hand, but he's determined, and a quick learner—"

"No, I mean... the enderwalking," Tommy said, gesturing awkwardly. "Um, I was just wondering — because, um, I heard Sam did it for that vigilante guy Theseus one time — if you could check, I dunno, like, camera footage from the street or something. See if there was anything that triggered it."

"Oh!" Phil exclaimed. "Well, actually — I've checked all that already. I was thinking the same thing."

Tommy blinked, recalling the figure Ranboo said he'd encountered. "Did you find anything?"

Phil frowned as he shook his head. "Any footage I found cuts out at the same time, and before anything really happens."

"What?" Tommy's heart picked up its pace as he wrapped his head around the implications of the answer. "Like someone messed with it? Do you think he was attacked?"

Phil raised a hand to calm him. "No, no, not necessarily. A lot of technology isn't made to be compatible with magic; if Ranboo entering enderwalk gave off any sort of magical signature, it could have interfered with the cameras and shut them off."

Tommy bit his cheek. To his knowledge, Ranboo's enderwalk didn't have much to do with magic; but then again, his knowledge on it was pretty limited. He wasn't sure Ranboo would have the answer, either, which left them at another dead-end.

"It's alright, mate," Phil assured him, noting Tommy's troubled expression. "He's safe at the tower. We'll keep an eye on him."

Except Ranboo had to go home at some point, and Tommy couldn't very well lock him into their apartment. He sighed. "Yeah. Okay."

The days passed far too slowly yet all too quick after that. Tommy was dying from the anticipation of Tubbo's arrival, and in the meantime, Ranboo was still holding a frustrating silence on the details of his vigilante training. The hybrid seemed to find Tommy's irritation about the lack of information amusing, given Tommy's own situation with Theseus. Tommy, having given up Theseus, was not inclined to agree.

That was just another thing he wasn't willing to deal with; the guilt he'd been struggling with ever since the hospital bombing had yet to ease. He'd thought, in retiring from his vigilante activities, that he wouldn't be able to hurt anyone else. Now the guilt had just shifted to abandoning his district and the people within it. He'd even seen an article online the other day: *"Where is Theseus, the hero of fourteenth?"*. It didn't feel as cool as it should have.

Tubbo called again that Saturday, when he was no longer so busy helping Schlatt get everything settled in L'Manberg. All too eager to meet up, Tommy had sent him the address to Niki's bakery and headed out straight away.

"Tommy!"

Tommy whipped around where he was waiting outside the doors to the bakery and was met with an armful of Tubbo thrown at him. He burst into laughter at the hybrid's energy, returning the hug with vigour.

"Tubbo!" he greeted in return, heart swelling. "It's so good to see you!"

"You too!" Tubbo laughed, pulling back from the hug. "I missed you!"

"I missed you too, big man," Tommy chuckled. He looked the boy up and down, grinning broadly. "You've got your horns out."

Tubbo nodded enthusiastically, reaching a hand to ruffle his hair where he'd parted it around his horns. "I thought about what you said that time, to make them my own," he said with a grin. He gestured to Tommy's outfit. "You still have your compass!"

"And the bandana," Tommy assured him. He caught a glint under Tubbo's blazer and smiled. "You have your compass too."

"I never take it off," Tubbo admitted happily. "I don't have many friends."

"You will here," Tommy replied with a grin. He could introduce him to Ranboo, and maybe even Wilbur and Techno — plus Niki, of course. "Come on, let's go in."

The pair made their way in the door, ringing the little bell overhead. The bakery was busier than the last time Tommy had visited with Wilbur; likely because it was earlier in the day, sunlight streaming in through square windows, and the weekend. Tubbo was admiring the homely room with wide eyes, and Tommy grinned at his enthusiasm as they joined the queue.

"Yeah, I know, this place is great," he said.

Tubbo nodded energetically. "I'm not even supposed to be out, really. Dad said it's safer inside."

Tommy raised an eyebrow. "Are you gonna get in trouble?"

"Probably not," Tubbo said with a shrug. "I doubt he'll notice I'm gone. He doesn't pay me much attention these days."

A sour taste made itself known at the back of Tommy's throat at that, and he wrinkled his nose. "Well, the city's not really dangerous during the day. Plus, you have me."

"Thought you didn't have powers," Tubbo teased, elbowing him.

Tommy rolled his eyes in amusement. "I can still punch a bitch."

Tubbo laughed. "Don't worry too much, I can handle myself," he replied brightly. "I've been practicing my enhancement since last time, I'm really good now."

"Really?" Tommy's eyebrows rose in surprise.

"Oh yeah," Tubbo answered confidently. "I'll have to show you. I can make things grow huge!"

"That's so cool!" Tommy enthused, bouncing off of Tubbo's optimism. "See, I told you your powers were interesting."

"Yeah, you did," Tubbo agreed cheerfully. "And you were right."

"Hello, boys!" a third voice interrupted them brightly, and the pair turned around to greet the guy behind the counter who had addressed them. "What can I get for you?"

"Ayup Jack," Tommy quipped in response, eyeing the guy's name tag on his shirt. "I like your glasses."

Jack pushed the glasses up the bridge of his nose at their mention, cracking a grin. One lens was red, the other blue; certainly a curious combination. "Thanks man," he said, appreciative. "They help keep my enhancement under control. X-ray vision, innit?"

"That's so cool," Tubbo enthused. "Can you see our guts and stuff?"

Jack lifted his glasses for a moment and examined Tubbo's torso. "Yup! See straight through you, if I want."

"What's it look like?"

Jack barked a laugh, letting his glasses settle on his nose again. "Gross."

"I bet mine look better," Tommy chimed in, puffing out his chest.

"As much as I'd love to make a competition out of it, I think Niki will kill me if I don't keep serving," Jack laughed. He gestured at the menu. "So please, gentlemen, let me be of service."

"What's good?" Tubbo asked, leaning into Tommy as he examined the pastries on display.

"Everything," Tommy answered honestly, and glanced at Jack. "Do I still get free shit?"

Jack blinked at him, bemused, and then recognition clicked behind his eyes. "Oh, you're Tommy!"

"The one and only," Tommy replied with a grin.

"Niki told me to keep an eye out for you," Jack explained with a nod. "She'll probably come out and have a chat once I tell her you're here. Busy baking at the moment."

"Nice, nice," Tommy said, and nudged Tubbo. "What are you thinking, Tubs?"

Tubbo shrugged. "Whatever you're getting."

"Alright," Tommy agreed. He turned to Jack. "So that'll be two hot chocolates, and... oh, it's gotta be chocolate muffins."

"Hot chocolate in summer?" Jack asked, quirking an eyebrow as he retrieved two muffins from the display.

Tommy shrugged. "It's good," was his justification.

Jack just laughed as he headed to the back. "Alright, let me make your drinks then."

"He seems nice," Tubbo remarked, watching Jack work the machine.

Tommy nodded in agreement. "I haven't seen him around here before. Must be a friend of Niki's."

"Does she usually run this place all by herself?"

"It's just been her any time I visit," Tommy replied. "Though I guess she has been getting busier."

"Shit!" Jack cursed aloud from behind the counter, as an empty mug slipped from his hands.

Tommy watched as the ceramic shattered on the tiled floor, unsure why every nerve in his body was suddenly put on edge as his senses zeroed in on the breaking mug. The sound shot through his skull like a bullet, thundering in his brain a million times louder than anything else in the room. There was a bubble around his head that had blocked out the rest of the world except for the shattering glass — but it was ceramic, not glass, so why did it remind

him so much of the hospital windows blowing open or the glass he had shattered to escape the cinema...?

"Tommy?"

A voice entered the bubble as a hand fell into place on his shoulder, gently easing his awareness from the mess that Jack was now sweeping up. Huh. He didn't even recall the man leaving to get a broom.

"Are you okay?" Tubbo asked, and Tommy turned to face him, not quite sure his eyes were registering the shorter boy's concerned face.

"Yeah, fine," he mumbled, though he still couldn't shake off the uncomfortable knot of anxiety in his stomach; as though he'd been climbing a ladder and missed a step, a brief second of panic stretched into a terrifying eternity.

"You're shaking," Tubbo murmured, voice soft, and Tommy clenched his fists.

"I'm not, I'm fine," he said, louder, firmer. There was no reason he shouldn't be fine, no reason his heart should be racing or his breaths shallow. But they were, and the glass that had shattered as a bomb wrecked a hospital had been *real* — but he was in the bakery with Tubbo, he was having fun — but it was all real, every one of his fears were things he had done or would do and he was destined to fail even if he tried, because even now, he was failing to keep it together when there was *nothing wrong*, but, but, but....

"Tommy," Tubbo whispered again, more urgently, eyes wide.

There were hands on his hands now, squeezing comfort into his shaking limbs — when had that happened? — and wisps of red were leaking from between his fingers as his magic responded to his fear, rising to face the threat — but there was no threat, and vaguely he reached the realisation that his magic being out in public was *not good*. He took a trembling inhale, failing again to compose himself as his lungs burned against the air he couldn't get them. He swore he could taste smoke in the air, the scent of fresh blood like metal on his

tongue — that didn't make sense, he wasn't there anymore, but it had still happened and it was *real*.

"Tommy?"

That was Niki's voice. Tommy glanced up, meeting the woman's eyes over the counter where she was approaching, Jack watching in confusion over her shoulder.

"Oh — here, why don't you come to the back for a second," Niki said, gesturing to the edge of the counter where the gate for staff was.

Tommy was led over there before he could make the decision to move his feet himself, Tubbo tugging gently at his sleeves. He came to his senses enough to tuck his hands under his arms, magic flowing of its own accord as panic continued to race aimlessly through his system. He caught a glimpse of the broken shards of mug on the floor and couldn't suppress the full-body shudder that hit him; couldn't even justify why it did.

He was being eased onto the floor before he had even registered his new surroundings; the faces around him were blurry and vague, taunting him with their lack of detail and mouths that moved without clear sound. One was shooed from his sight, and he took another wobbly inhale, panic only growing in his confusion. What the fuck was happening? Was *this* even real? Had he left the hospital at all?

Something brushed his arm and he flinched back, magic lashing out at the hand that rapidly withdrew. He forced it to relax as Tubbo's startled expression came into focus, immediate guilt narrowing his throat.

"Sorry," he choked out.

"That's on me, I should've asked," Tubbo assured him, not at all put off by the red power still surging in Tommy's hands. "Hey, listen to me — you're okay."

"I'm sorry," Tommy repeated, stumbling over the rush of words that came out with the little air in his lungs. "I don't know what's...."

"It's okay," Tubbo hushed him softly. "You're safe here. Can you breathe with me?"

Tommy could barely even think straight, his heartbeat like thunder in his ears. "I can't—"

"That's alright, look, just follow me the best you can," Tubbo said. He took a deep inhale then, as though it was easy, but Tommy managed something similar after a few shaky breaths. "See? You're doing great."

Tommy had to swallow the heavy guilt lodged in his throat at the statement. He wasn't doing great, really. Not with anything. "Sorry."

"You have nothing to apologise for, you've done nothing wrong," Tubbo insisted, and oh, how naive he was. "Hey, do you smell the stuff Niki's baking? Pretty good, right? I don't know the menu though."

All Tommy could smell was blood and smoke, but when he took his next inhale, he was surprised to discover that the scent of sweet pastries washed everything else away. He shut his eyes, grounding himself in the tastes.

"Cinnamon," he murmured, voice tight but less so than it had been. "Honey."

"I'm trying a new recipe," Niki said softly, and oh, she was still here.

"Smells good," Tommy replied, and opened his eyes again. The room and its occupants came into focus properly this time, and he strategically avoided the gazes of Niki and Tubbo as he examined the numerous ovens. His magic, at some point, had retreated, though he could still feel it thrumming beneath his skin.

"Are you alright?" Niki asked.

"Yeah," Tommy croaked, cheeks flushing with embarrassment. "Sorry. I dunno what that was."

"It happens to me sometimes," Tubbo admitted with a shrug. "Don't worry about it. You did really well."

"What was it?" Tommy asked, not entirely sure he wanted to know the answer.

Tubbo glanced away. "A panic attack, probably."

"Oh," Tommy said. "Right."

Tubbo nodded. "The main thing is to breathe, or find something that'll ground you. Strong smells work really well for me. Or textures."

Tommy nodded slowly, taking another wary breath. "Um... thanks. For helping."

"You'd do the same for me," Tubbo said, and smiled.

"What happened?" Niki asked gently.

Tommy shrugged, dropping his gaze. "Jack dropped a mug," he mumbled. "I think that was it. Um... reminded me of the hospital, somehow." He chuckled. "Wow, that sounds stupid, huh?"

"Not at all," Tubbo responded firmly. "Also, you don't have to tell us, if you don't want to. Unless you think it'll help."

"You know I'm enhanced now," Tommy mumbled. "Might as well know the full story."

That was how he ended up spilling all his secrets and woes to Niki and Tubbo in the back room of a bakery on a Saturday afternoon. His eyes were watery by the end of it and his throat dry, but he kept his tears unshed, which ultimately he regarded as a win.

"I saw the news about the hospital, but Primes," Niki whispered, her own eyes shining a little more than usual. "I'm so sorry, Tommy."

"It's my fault," Tommy said hoarsely.

"Not in the slightest," Tubbo argued firmly. "They put the bomb there and made you think you had a choice."

"But I did," Tommy said.

Tubbo shook his head with a small smile. "That's what they wanted you to think, Tommy. I think this was probably their plan all along."

Tommy blinked at him, bewildered. "What?"

"Obviously they want you on their side, right?" Tubbo murmured with a shrug. "So they probably want to make you feel so isolated and alone that you'll have nobody else to turn to."

"Why do they want *me*, anyway?" Tommy asked, staring at his hands. "Is it my enhancement? I'm not the most powerful person in the city or anything. Why me?"

Tubbo frowned. "That I don't know," he admitted. "But don't let them have you, Tommy. Just... you're not alone, you know? And none of this is your fault."

Tommy smiled weakly at him. Tubbo smiled back.

"Is this why you've been taking a break from patrolling?" Niki asked. "I noticed you haven't been out."

Tommy nodded. "I can't help but feel like it's my fault," he mumbled. "I don't want anything like that to happen again. But... somehow quitting patrol feels worse."

"Just because you have the power to stop violence doesn't make it your fault if you don't," Niki murmured. "You're *sixteen*, Tommy. Nobody should expect anything from a kid. Not even you."

"Man," Tommy sighed in half-amusement, rubbing at his eyes, "when you put it like that...."

"Hey, Big T, everything you're feeling is valid, y'know?" Tubbo said, reaching out a hand to place over Tommy's. Tommy smiled this time, accepting the touch. "You've just been through a lot of really bad shit."

"And you don't care that I'm a vigilante?" Tommy asked sheepishly. "Well. *Was* a vigilante?"

"Of course not," Tubbo said with a snort. "I think it's really fucking cool."

"Really?"

"Yeah!" Tubbo enthused, standing and offering a hand to help Tommy to his feet. "Like, spending your free time saving people? That is so cool. You're like a hero."

Tommy smiled, and brushed off his pants. "Thanks, big man."

The door creaked open just then, and Jack peered his head in the door. "Is everything alright in here?"

"All good, Jack," Niki affirmed.

"Great," Jack said, relieved. "We need more toffee puddings, stat."

"They're ready to go, give me a minute," Niki replied. She glanced at Tommy, gaze fond. "You all good?"

"Yup," Tommy said with a firm nod. "Are we still getting those muffins, though?"

Jack snorted. "Nah, I ate them myself."

"Jack!" Tubbo cried, feigning horror. "We trusted you!"

"Fine, fine. I guess you can have them."

"Good," Tommy laughed. "I'm starving."

Chapter End Notes

college is so fun omg. i am loving it. the social life is great, what we're studying is great, public transport is absolute hell and the lack of free time is... somehow surprising
akhfkjd but i will still write B)

so sorry if i dont get around to answering comments!! rest assured i still read every one
but typing out responses takes a lot of time and i dont want to leave anyone out ajhdjshs

but i adore reading all ur theories and reactions!! AND, BC WOW,,, THANK U SM
FOR 300K. MINDBLOWING ILY ALL <33

A Hero's Betrayal

Chapter Summary

With little time before the gala at the Watchtower, everyone is busy preparing. When a spanner is thrown in the works for one of SBI, a question of trust is brought up once again.

CW// descriptions of injury

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for [notes](#)

The gala was tomorrow night and Tommy still knew very little about it. He had decided to lay off bothering Phil with questions given the man's mood was still a little low; he would smile at Tommy and make lighthearted conversation, but when he thought nobody was looking, he dropped the facade. Hence, Tommy thought it best to give the man some space. Instead, he'd been pestering Wilbur and Techno, but they didn't have much more information than he did.

"It's a charity gala," Techno had told him with a shrug. "We hold them every now and again. Since we're gonna have a bunch of visitors over, seems like a good reason for one."

"Schlatt will be there," Tommy stated, checking Techno's face for any reaction.

"Yes," Techno confirmed. "We did invite Puffy, and the Dream Team, though we haven't heard anything from them in quite a while. Not sure if they'll show."

Tommy bit his cheek at that. "You think they're okay?"

"Okay?" Techno echoed, glancing at him. "They're some of the most capable people I know. They should be."

"But you agree it's weird that they stopped communicating," Tommy said, picking up on the hero's hesitance.

Techno made a face. "Yeah."

Tommy glanced away again, uncertainty plaguing the forefront of his thoughts. He didn't trust Schlatt, that was for certain, but he wasn't sure SBI would share his sentiments. They had invited him — or at least, Phil had — so they must have trusted him somewhat. At least enough that he and half his company was being welcomed into their home in a few days; maybe it was an obligation to invite him. He knew Wilbur had made his distaste for the man known, at least.

He decided to change the subject.

"And what do we do at a gala? What will *I* do? Serve drinks?"

Techno raised an eyebrow at him, amused. "Serve drinks?" he echoed. "You're *our* assistant, not the whole tower's. And it's a Saturday. You're off duty."

Tommy blinked. "So what'll I do? Dance?" He snorted. "Or is it too posh for dancing?"

"You can dance if you want," Techno said with a shrug. "Some kids from the vigilante program are invited too, and I imagine talking that long gets a little boring for people your age."

"People my age," Tommy had echoed with a laugh. "I'm sixteen. And I love talking."

"I never would've guessed," Techno remarked dryly.

"That feels insulting."

"I would never insult you."

Tommy elbowed Techno in the side, rolling his eyes in amusement. He paused then, mind catching up with Techno's earlier words. "Wait — so vigilantes from the program are gonna be there? Vigilantes my age."

Techno smiled, picking up on Tommy's implications. "Yes, Ranboo is also invited."

"Does he know he's invited?" Tommy asked, squinting warily.

"I believe so."

"That bitch," Tommy said — affectionately — but tone stiff with a hint of bitterness he couldn't quite stamp out. "He couldn't even tell me. He doesn't tell me anything anymore."

Techno's eyes glimmered with amusement, though he kept his voice genuine. "Does that bother you?"

"Yes!" Tommy retorted, crossing his arms with a pout. "I know that— okay. Um. It's just... I thought we told each other everything. He's the only person I can, y'know? But now he's keeping secrets and it... sucks. I thought he trusted me."

Techno nodded in quiet understanding, taking a moment to reply. "He does trust you, Tommy. And it's not necessarily him keeping secrets.... I'll have a word with his mentor about it."

"His mentor," Tommy scoffed. "Another secret."

"As per request," Techno noted lightheartedly. "Don't worry. He's in good hands."

"He better be," Tommy grumbled.

"The best," Techno affirmed. He bit his cheek, hesitating. "And Tommy... you can talk to us, too, you know."

Tommy swallowed the heart palpitations that arose in response to the memory of the last time he'd tried. "I know," he said quietly. "I do trust you."

Techno smiled. "I'm glad. I trust you too, for what it's worth."

"Obviously," Tommy said with a grin. "I'm the most trustworthy man there is."

"Sure you are," Techno snorted. He gave Tommy's hair a ruffle. "Don't worry too much about Ranboo, kid. He knows you've had a lot on your mind recently; he probably doesn't want to overload you."

"Yeah," Tommy murmured, nodding. "It's fine. As long as he's fine."

"Tommy!"

The pair glanced over to Phil's office, where the man was leaning expectantly on the doorway, a relaxed smile on his face.

Tommy nodded at his employer with a grin. "Duty calls," he said to Techno, rising from his seat.

"Have fun."

"Will do," Tommy replied. He paused. "And Tech?"

Techno smiled. "Yes?"

Tommy's hands fidgeted together, and he glanced down at them to avoid the direct eye contact. "It's worth a lot."

It was Friday morning now; Tommy still had no idea what was going on the following night, but supposed he'd be given the necessary details when the time came. One of his main concerns, something Ranboo had brought up when they'd discussed the gala together, was the fact that neither of them had anything remotely fancy to wear to such an event. He was a bit hesitant to bring this up with Phil, worried the man might try to raise his pay again.

That was aside from his lingering concerns about Schlatt, which he hadn't forgotten about. But at least Tubbo would be there.

"Do you think Ghostbur will ever come around again?" Ranboo asked.

The pair were sitting on the rickety stairs outside their apartment building, awaiting Wilbur's arrival. Tommy tried not to stiffen at the question. As if he wasn't the reason Ghostbur still hadn't visited them since discovering the truth about Tommy.

"I dunno," he said honestly. And then, "I miss him."

"Me too," Ranboo murmured. He glanced sideways at Tommy. "And don't think I don't see that face. I know what you're thinking. It's not your fault."

"Don't say that," Tommy grumbled. "It is my fault. We both know it."

"It wasn't like you had a choice," Ranboo said. "If you'd told them you were a vigilante in the beginning you would've been arrested."

"I might still be if I tell them now," Tommy mumbled. If Ghostbur had reacted the way he had, he couldn't stand the thought of what Wilbur would do. "I shouldn't have become a vigilante in the first place."

"You made the choice to help people," Ranboo reasoned. "Nobody can fault you for that."

Only for the lying, and all the people I've hurt, Tommy thought bitterly, though didn't voice that. He couldn't change what he'd done in the past. Ranboo was just trying to help, and it wasn't his fault that had become increasingly difficult to do in the last few weeks.

"I think Ghostbur will come around," Ranboo continued, as Tommy remained silent. "Wilbur is, at least."

Tommy glanced sideways at him. "What do you mean?"

Ranboo shrugged, smiling. "I mean, with the whole program in the tower, and everything.... Oh, he's here."

Tommy looked up, eyebrows furrowing in confusion as Techno's car pulled up to their building. Wilbur had hardly crashed his own one again, had he? He wasn't *that* bad of a driver.

"Techno?" he called down, surprised as said hero stepped out of the driver's seat.

Techno greeted the pair with a two-fingered salute as they made their way down the steps. "Sorry I'm late."

"Where's Wilbur?" Ranboo asked.

Techno opened the door to the backseat for them. "There's been a... situation," he admitted. Upon spotting Tommy's concerned expression, he continued. "He's fine. Uh, I'll let him tell you two about it."

That did little to settle Tommy's worry. "What do you mean, a situation?"

Techno waited until they were all buckled in, getting back into his seat and busying himself with starting the car. "An incident on his patrol last night," he answered awkwardly. "He's fine."

Wilbur, when they finally arrived after a tense drive, was not exactly what Tommy would call fine. As he, Ranboo and Techno left the elevator, they were greeted by poorly concealed curses and Phil's mildly irritated voice.

"*Fuck*," Wilbur hissed. "Can you—"

"I have to change the dressing, mate," Phil said, apparently struggling to keep his cool. "Quit moving."

"Quit hurting me then!"

Tommy picked up the pace as he made his way to the kitchen, and his heart dropped upon spotting the two. Wilbur was sitting on the edge of the table with no shirt, Phil standing at his side with handfuls of gauze and the first aid kit open next to him. Stretching from the bottom of Wilbur's rib cage on his left side all the way up to his neck was a gruesome red burn wound, still blisteringly raw. A pale green paste had been applied to parts of it, though even beneath that Wilbur's skin was an angry scarlet, and the uncovered parts were even worse. Tommy's breath caught in his throat as he took in the horrific sight.

"Wil?!"

Wilbur's head shot up in surprise as he registered Tommy's voice, and he scrambled to grab his shirt and hide his wounds.

"Shit, man," Tommy stammered, hurrying over. Phil carefully stretched out a wing to keep him from coming too close. "What the fuck happened? Are you okay?"

"Yes, I'm fine," Wilbur insisted, throwing on his shirt and then pausing to wince in pain. "Sorry you had to see that, Tommy."

"I wasn't done," Phil sighed, folding his arms.

"Yeah, yeah, it'll do," Wilbur waved him off, clenching his jaw again at the motion as he slid off the table. "I have to go see Charlie again in a few hours anyway."

"Oh Primes," Ranboo breathed, wringing his hands nervously as he approached. "Are you sure you're alright? It looks pretty bad — I mean, not that it looks *bad*, but—"

"Ranboo," Wilbur said, fixing the new vigilante with a steady gaze. "It's fine."

"That's not fine!" Tommy exclaimed, panic still churning in his stomach. "What the fuck?"

"Okay, yeah, maybe I'll have to wear a high collar for the gala tomorrow," Wilbur joked, though his amused expression looked more like a wince under the worried stares of the two teens. He glanced between them again and sighed, upon noting that neither of them had been appeased. "Primes, you two, it's nothing."

Tommy was on the verge of ripping his hair out; Wilbur was clearly badly hurt, the burn still peeking out over the collar of his t-shirt, but was waving away the injury as though it wasn't a cause for concern. He took a steady breath to calm himself, wondering if this was how SBI felt every time they'd caught him hiding another bruise. Fuck, everything was flipping upside down recently; Ranboo stepping up as a vigilante while Tommy stepped back, SBI *totally accepting* that while Tommy still couldn't bring himself to admit his own truth — the panic

attack, the gala and Schlatt coming to the tower, the Egg shit still hanging over his head, now Wilbur looked like he'd been put half through a toaster and was saying *it was nothing* — too much was happening, too much was changing and he couldn't keep up. Primes, he would do anything to take it back a month or two, back when he saved people from small crimes on patrol and was close enough with SBI to enjoy working with them but not so much so that it physically hurt to know that their trust in him was built on lies.

He took another breath, slower and deeper. The others were still talking.

"I'm on daily treatment for at least a week. His enhancement is very handy—"

"What happened?" Tommy interrupted, once he was sure his voice wouldn't shake. He needed to know that it wasn't the Egg cult going after the people he loved — that it wasn't his fault Wilbur was hurt.

Wilbur tensed, glancing away. "Just some shit on patrol," he muttered.

Well, that was bullshit if Tommy had ever heard it.

"You're deflecting," he said, daring the man to look him in the eye.

Wilbur met his gaze coolly. "What, like you do every time we see you hurt?"

Tommy blinked, caught off guard by the comeback. He ground his teeth. "I thought we were past that."

"Past it?" Wilbur echoed, narrowing his eyes. "Tommy, you have another bruise every week. You think I'd just forget that? That I don't care? Are you hiding one right now?"

"No! What the fuck, man?" Tommy spat out, stepping back.

"It wasn't Ranboo, sure," Wilbur said, "but it was someone. So what happened to *you*, Tommy?"

Tommy's mouth opened and closed wordlessly, bile rising in his throat as he struggled to come back with something.

"Stop it," Phil chided them sternly, stepping into the argument. "Primes, both of you, chill out. Can't you ever talk things out without yelling at each other?"

Wilbur was still staring Tommy in the eye, though with a sigh, he let his shoulders relax and his gaze soften. "Sorry, Tommy. That wasn't fair of me."

But you keep bringing it up, Tommy thought wearily. He let the tension out of his own body, and nodded. "I'm sorry too. I didn't mean to pry."

"I get it," Wilbur murmured. "You were just worried."

"I guess we both are," Tommy said.

"You two are very talented at making things awkward," Techno deadpanned; he and Ranboo were standing back from the bickering, the latter looking especially uncomfortable.

Wilbur rolled his eyes. "Just for you, Techie."

"Call me that again and I will make your right side match the left," Techno said evenly.

"Techno!" Phil said, wings rising.

Wilbur smirked, lightly elbowing the piglin hybrid as he moved past him towards the couch. "Whatever you say, Techie."

Tommy let himself laugh, and Ranboo finally eased up somewhat, glancing between the room's occupants.

"Am I still training today?" Ranboo asked, peering curiously at Wilbur.

Wilbur nodded. "Eret's down there with Purpled today, you can join them."

Tommy looked at Wilbur, and then Ranboo, eyes narrowing. "Who do you usually train with?"

"His mentor," Wilbur answered smoothly. "But I usually accompany him down there, so Eret can mind him for today."

"Until his mentor shows up, of course," Tommy said, staring suspiciously at the hero.

Wilbur met his gaze steadily. "Yes."

Tommy huffed. "I know you all think I'm too stressed to handle it, or whatever, but not giving me any details about Ranboo's training is *not* making it better," he said, cutting to the chase. There was no point beating around the bush with this when they didn't seem to understand his issue. "I'm gonna worry anyway. I *am* worrying anyway. So you can, y'know, tell me things."

Wilbur softened. "That's... not the entire reason," he replied carefully. "But I get what you mean. I'll... see what I can do about it."

Tommy didn't catch the look Techno sent Wilbur's way, distracted by Ranboo lightly bumping into his side with a reassuring smile.

"I promise it's nothing to worry about, either," he said gently. "It's all really small stuff I'm doing. Nothing like — um — like street vigilantes. Like Theseus. I won't be allowed to patrol for a long while yet, and when I do it won't be alone."

Tommy caught his knowing look, and nodded, sighing. He supposed he would just have to trust them all. At least Wilbur seemed to genuinely like Ranboo's company now; he didn't think the man would let him do anything that would get himself hurt.

"Techno, you can bring Ranboo down, then," Wilbur said, waving the two away. "I — very unfortunately — have to take it easy today. No work for me."

Phil seemed to catch onto Wilbur's smug tone and raised an eyebrow at the man where he was lounging on the couch. "I wouldn't be so quick to write that off, mate," he said, sounding all too pleased to deliver the news. "Paperwork isn't off the table. Tommy's been very good at keeping you up to date, but I think it's only fair you help him today with your mission reports."

Wilbur scowled. "I don't want to do my mission report."

Tommy didn't miss how he had switched to the singular form of the word. Obviously the hero's patrol last night had gone south, but it must have been pretty bad if he didn't want to acknowledge it at all.

Phil lowered Wilbur a serious gaze. "You have to write it up eventually," he warned. "It's better to put it out of mind now, rather than be thinking about it until you do."

"Yeah, I know," Wilbur grumbled. "But don't expect me to be happy about it."

"Trust me, I wasn't," Phil retorted dryly.

Tommy snorted, making his way over to the couch to take his seat at Wilbur's side. If nothing else, he hoped his presence could be a comfort.

"See you later then, Tommy," Ranboo called, heading to the elevator with Techno. "I'll let you know how I get on."

"Yeah," Tommy agreed with a smile, hoping they were taking his earlier words on board at last and were willing to tell him more. "See you later, Ranboob."

Ranboo rolled his eyes, and he and Techno disappeared around the corner. Phil had left for his office momentarily to grab work for Wilbur, leaving said hero and Tommy alone in the living area.

They sat in comfortable silence for a few moments. Tommy could feel the slightly strained movement of Wilbur's breathing against his arm. The rise and fall of his chest was staggered; not enough to be dangerous, but enough that it made Tommy wince. Even if Wilbur wasn't in pain, which Tommy seriously doubted, he was at the very least uncomfortable.

"Will it take long to heal?" he asked. He figured that was a safe question; he didn't want to provoke the hero any further, but for the sake of easing the knot of worry in his throat, he needed to know that Wilbur would be okay.

"Charlie gave me four weeks," Wilbur replied evenly, shrugging. "Well — officially it'll take six months before it's perfectly healed. But the important healing will be done in a month."

"A month?" Tommy echoed, face falling. He had received some pretty shit injuries himself, but he never recalled them taking that long to recover from. He was pretty lucky with how fast he healed.

"Well, yeah, but it's not like I'll be benched until then," Wilbur said, easing some humour into his tone in an attempt to reassure the teen. "I'm still functioning, as you can see."

Tommy didn't laugh.

"Here we go," Phil's voice sounded, as the winged hybrid re-entered the room with a handful of papers and a clipboard in hand. "Report forms for your past three missions. I advise you do the most recent one first."

Tommy reached to take the clipboard and papers before Wilbur could stretch and aggravate his burns. "Thank you, Phil."

Phil smiled. "No problem, Tommy. Let me know when you're done; I have a couple things I wouldn't mind you going over before your break."

He headed away again, and Tommy settled back into his seat, clipboard in his lap. Wilbur groaned, leaning his head back to stare at the ceiling.

"I guess we should get this over with," Tommy said, a little awkwardly. "If you really want, I can leave—"

"Stay," Wilbur said, and met his gaze. "If you don't mind."

Tommy blinked. "I don't."

Wilbur smiled weakly, and Tommy smiled back. He pulled a pen from his shirt pocket.

"Here, I'll even write."

"My right side's fine, I can manage," Wilbur argued.

Tommy wouldn't hear it. "I'm already writing it," he teased. "Time of departure?"

"Gremlin," Wilbur shot back. "Ten thirty p.m."

Tommy scratched the time in the appropriate blank. "Persons dispatched?"

Wilbur's jaw tensed slightly. "Myself and Fundy."

"Location?"

"Fourth and fifth."

"Okay," Tommy said, filling that in too. "Time returned?"

Wilbur was quiet a moment longer. "I don't know. I'll ask Charlie later what time I was admitted to the medbay."

Tommy paused, glancing sideways at the hero as an uncomfortable nausea settled in the pit of his stomach.

Wilbur swallowed. "I was brought in unconscious. Phil and Techno found me; my comms were offline too long, so it pinged them my location."

"Ghostbur didn't tell them?" Tommy asked, eyes wide.

Wilbur shook his head. "He was... unavailable, this time."

"Unavailable?" Tommy echoed, reluctant. He wasn't sure he wanted the explanation.

Wilbur took a long inhale, careful to mind his wounded side. "Are you on the mission details section?"

Tommy glanced at the page on his clipboard. "Yeah."

"Little activity in the fourth district," Wilbur recalled, pausing to give Tommy ample time to catch up with his writing. "Apprehended a weapons dealer; um, not the one we've been looking for in sixth. Upon crossing the border into fifth, noted unusual behaviour from Fundy."

Tommy swallowed. "Unusual behaviour?" he prompted. The more descriptive the details on reports, the better — especially with a mission that had gone south. They were sometimes brought up in meetings for review and analysis.

Wilbur took another breath, not as careful, and had to hide the way his face screwed up in pain. Tommy's heart twisted.

"Not communicating well," the hero elaborated, after a moment. "Not responding immediately to my signals; answers were muddled and unclear. He was struggling to keep up with my pace."

"And given his super speed, that's definitely not right," Tommy mused, continuing to scribble hurriedly.

Wilbur nodded in the peripherals of his vision. "Exactly. Um... Fundy stopped completely after a few minutes of this behaviour. Seemed to be unresponsive. Upon approach, he lashed out."

Tommy paused to glance worriedly at Wilbur; the hero had clenched his fists, expression sour.

"A fight ensued; I was unprepared and Fundy — er — knocked me unconscious. A blow to the head — can't remember what it was...."

"Don't worry about that, I can go to Charlie for more information on injuries," Tommy piped up, frowning.

Wilbur nodded slowly, taking his time before speaking again. "Ghostbur woke up on the scene. Before he could escape — Fundy, he — um, he—"

Tommy dropped the pen for a moment, giving Wilbur's arm a comforting squeeze. The hero took another shuddering breath, reaching up to pinch the bridge of his nose.

"He's my patrol partner; he knows my weaknesses," he spat. "I don't remember where he got the water. Ghostbur was forced to retreat from the extent of the burns, which then attached themselves to me. That's the whole story."

Tommy didn't pick up the pen again just yet, gaze still fixed on Wilbur's tight expression. There was a physical pain in his chest; sympathy manifested into a pull on his heartstrings. Sympathy, or guilt — because there was a lingering fear regarding the situation he couldn't quite kick.

That maybe a certain crowd of people were involved; people who had promised to hurt those he held dear.

"There was one other thing," Wilbur added, straightening carefully as he recalled the detail. "Fundy mentioned having a wicked headache. Maybe, like, a few minutes before the weird behaviour? It must have been pretty bad, because he had to stop to breathe through it."

Tommy's stomach dropped through the floor. The room must have been closing in on him; the air in his lungs was suddenly a little too tight, limbs heavy with the sensation of being trapped. Oh, that wasn't good at all.

"Tommy?" Wilbur said, poking him in the side. "You still with me?"

Breathe. "Yes," Tommy answered stiffly. "Sorry."

The headache.... How could he have forgotten it? It had happened to him so long ago; so many horrible things had happened since that he'd dismissed it entirely. The night he'd met Quackity in fifteenth, when he'd been sure he'd seen a shadow move in the darkness — that had been right before he'd been hit with a splitting migraine, so painful it had toppled him. He'd brushed it off as someone playing around with their enhancement, but if that too tied in with the Egg crowd, things were so much worse than he'd thought. Just how long had this been going on?

And if Fundy had been captured by the Egg cult's mind control power right after the headache, why hadn't he?

"Was there anyone else there?" he asked, unable to entirely squash the urgency in his tone.

Wilbur glanced sideways at him, concerned. "I don't think so. Why?"

Tommy inhaled slowly, looking away. He was probably overthinking it, right? It could all be a coincidence. Or he was going to ignore it again for the sake of keeping his own secrets until someone else he loved got hurt. He swallowed the bile gathering in his throat. He couldn't keep doing this — but *fuck*, he wasn't ready to risk giving up everything he'd built around him. *Even at the expense of your friends? Your family?*

"I dunno," he mumbled, hating himself for it. "Just thought... obviously it's not like Fundy at all to do something like that, so maybe a third person was involved."

Wilbur pondered this for a moment, eyebrows knitting together. "That... might actually make sense," he admitted. "I was so caught up over the betrayal.... Even if not there with us, someone else must have had a hand in this. Maybe you're onto something."

"Where's Fundy now?" Tommy asked.

Wilbur shrugged. "Nobody's seen him since. We've checked footage from all over the city. He just... disappeared."

Tommy swallowed hard. "And Ghostbur?"

"He's... recovering, still," Wilbur responded reluctantly. "It's not often we both go down. Water, it... melts him, in a sense. He couldn't sustain his form so he retreated. I won't be able to sleep properly until he's healed enough to manifest again."

"Oh shit," Tommy cursed under his breath, alarmed by that thought. "Fuck. Ghostbur getting hurt... that's dangerous for you, too."

"Yeah," Wilbur admitted bitterly. "But he recovers fast. I'll be able to sleep in a day or so."

"Primes," Tommy murmured, concern broiling in his gut. "Wil... I'm so sorry about all of that."

"Yeah, it's pretty shit," Wilbur agreed, though a hand rose to cover Tommy's, where it still lay on his arm. He gave his fingers a grateful squeeze. "Thank you, though. For being here. It kind of helped to talk about it, actually."

"Of course," Tommy said. "Anytime. You'd do it for me."

"I would," Wilbur affirmed, meeting his gaze. He looked away again when Tommy remained quiet, closing his eyes. "Can I trust you, Tommy?"

The question threw Tommy completely off guard. "Wil—?"

"I trusted Fundy," Wilbur murmured. "With my life. We always had each other's backs; we've been partners for years. And if... if there wasn't someone else involved, then...."

"There must be," Tommy insisted, still trying to calm the racing of his heart. "He had no reason to betray you."

"Right?" Wilbur agreed, though the reply lacked confidence. "But here we are."

Tommy bit his cheek hard. "I'll always be here, Wil. As long as you'll let me."

"Phil's been on edge for a while now," Wilbur muttered. "It's not just Kristin's anniversary. There's something else."

"Phil wouldn't betray you," Tommy said, and he had never believed so strongly in his words as he did then. "Never."

"I thought the same of Fundy," Wilbur spat. He exhaled slowly. "I thought the same of everyone."

"Violence has been on the rise all over the city all summer," Tommy mused, brushing off the alarm bells ringing in response to Wilbur's apparent paranoia. "Everyone's uneasy. It feels like something big is happening."

Wilbur met his gaze. "But I can trust you?"

Something sick and cold and nauseating twisted itself deep in Tommy's core. He swallowed hard, unable to rid himself of the bitter taste in his mouth. "The last thing I'd ever want to do is hurt you," he whispered. "I promise you."

Wilbur carefully manoeuvred himself enough to pull Tommy into a hug, mission report long forgotten. Tommy accepted it gladly, though it didn't quite stamp out the unease lingering in

his mind.

"Then I'll have your back," Wilbur murmured, holding him tight. "As long as you have mine."

"Always," Tommy whispered.

"If something's happening," Wilbur said, "if something's twisting the minds of people in the city — I won't let them have you. Or me. Or Techno, or Phil, or Ranboo — I'll keep us safe."

"You trust me?" Tommy asked, fearing the answer.

"I do," Wilbur whispered. "I do."

Tommy wasn't sure whether or not that was what he wanted to hear anymore.

Chapter End Notes

hope everyone's doing well!! and fingers crossed the next chapter will be out very soon bc BIG things are happening folks. i am very excited to get the next few chapters written >:) thank you for all ur support!! <33

The Gala

Chapter Summary

The day of the gala has arrived, just as the heroes begin to piece together the happenings of late.

CW// descriptions of injury/sickness

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for [notes](#)

"I was thinking," Wilbur said, watching from the couch as Tommy tried on another too-large suit. This one was a deep navy blue in colour, though the sleeves were too long and the material itched against his wrists. "About Fundy."

It was four in the afternoon on the Saturday of the gala; the event started in just a couple hours on one of the more public floors. Wilbur was already dressed, just missing the blazer of his suit; Tommy had yet to find something that fit him properly. Techno returned intermittently with more suit options in all sorts of colours and sizes. Ranboo was on a lower floor getting ready with the others in the vigilante program; Tommy had chuckled at the thought of whoever was going to have to tailor a suit for the tall young hybrid.

He slowed his movements as he glanced warily at Wilbur; he hadn't brought up the incident since they had finished filing the mission report yesterday. His burns had been wrapped in a clean white bandage for the gala, though they were still visible over the collar of his dress shirt. Not quite out of sight, nor out of mind.

"What about him?" Tommy asked, a little reluctant. Wilbur's crisis of trust the previous day still had him thrown; his guilt had only worsened, lying heavier in his throat than it usually did.

"And Ranboo," Wilbur added, and that really grabbed Tommy's attention. "Their incidents were quite similar, don't you think?"

"Yeah," Tommy agreed, dread pooling in his stomach. He fidgeted with the cuff of the too-long sleeves.

"Two people lashing out violently when that would normally be unlike them," Wilbur continued, leaning forward in his seat. "Except Ranboo's still here, and Fundy isn't."

"You think they're connected," Tommy inferred. He swallowed heavily; of course someone in SBI was going to come to the same conclusion that he had, given more time — only he was the one with more information, and he couldn't give it up without giving up everything. *Soon.*

"Maybe," Wilbur murmured. "There are similarities. Both times happened in the city, late at night, and both people acted similarly — we wrote Ranboo's off as ender-walking, but this is twice now. And what if it isn't just twice — we've all said it, everyone knows about the worsening violence."

The pool of dread in Tommy's stomach was growing ever deeper. "Are you saying you don't think Ranboo was ender-walking?"

"Maybe not," Wilbur said, gaze darkening. He paused, contemplative. "Or maybe his ender-walk is what's different; maybe it actually saved him, in a sense. Maybe that's why he came back from it."

"Shit," Tommy breathed, chest tight. He hadn't entirely considered the full extent of everything that was going on, but Wilbur had a point. "Would that make sense, though?"

"I don't know enough about his ender-walk to say for sure," Wilbur admitted. He looked up. "You were saying yesterday... that it feels like something big is happening. I see it now. Like a big puzzle, but we don't have all the pieces yet."

"But we do have some pieces," Tommy murmured, mostly to himself. He took a shaky inhale and met Wilbur's gaze. "Maybe more than we realise, if we start putting them together. Ranboo, Fundy, the violence — that's not even half of what's been happening."

Wilbur stared at him, and Tommy could practically see the gears turning in his mind. "You're right," the hero said, nodding. "*Shit*. If this is all — a *thing* — then we can't afford to wait around any longer. We've been sitting here complaining about our jobs getting harder, completely ignoring what's been right in front of us all along—"

"We don't even know what it is yet," Tommy stammered, ignoring the incessant guilty shouts in his head. *Liar. Liar. Egg. Egg*. "We can't make any moves until we figure out what's actually going on."

"Yeah," Wilbur agreed. His shoulders were drawn up, body tense. "So what do we have? Outbreaks of violence across the city, and now it's creeping closer to home. Ranboo, Fundy... what's the connection?" He froze before Tommy could get in a word, some sort of realisation striking. "*I* was there both times. What if it's... Ghostbur, or the curse—?"

He met Tommy's gaze with fearful, guilty eyes, and Tommy's heart tightened painfully. Fuck, he couldn't let Wilbur think this was his fault, not when it was *his*.

"Maybe Fundy wasn't the target," he whispered weakly, heart pounding hard in his chest.

Wilbur's expression fell even further. "You think it was me?"

"Just a thought," Tommy mumbled, glancing away nervously.

"Me and Ranboo?" Wilbur questioned. "But then the connection — that could only be...."

The realisation hit him like a train, and his eyes were wide as he looked at the teen standing in front of him in a new light. Tommy's lungs had constricted.

"No, that doesn't make sense," Wilbur said, face screwing up in confusion and denial — the realisation was gone as quick as it had come. "Why you? You're just an assistant, nobody

would have any reason to—"

He stopped again, wringing his hands as he thought. Tommy stood uncomfortably as Wilbur rose from the couch, pacing back and forth in heavy contemplation.

"You're our *assistant*," he repeated, stressed. "You're a close link to SBI — to all the heroes here — and a weak link, too; you're unenhanced, untrained, just human, just a kid, you'd be an obvious target for anyone looking to get into the tower — holy *shit*, Tommy—"

Tommy nearly flinched in surprise as the hero whirled around suddenly, grasping him by the shoulders. His eyes were wide.

"You could be in danger," Wilbur breathed, and then took a step back, face falling. "Sorry, shit — oh Primes. I'm just overreacting, right? Not looking at the other pieces. Right. Techno — Techno's been out too, he'll know more. He — *oh Primes, Theseus* — that vigilante, the one who doesn't speak, wasn't he in one of Techno's mission reports? The hospital in fifteenth, wasn't there something about mind control mentioned there? And now he's missing, because Techno won't shut up worrying about him — oh Primes—"

Tommy had to manually force himself to take long, deep breaths as Wilbur continued to mutter to himself, pacing rapidly back and forth across the living area. Primes, all the information was right there in front of him; with a lick of common sense he could have Tommy's secrets laid out flat, plain to see. If Tommy could only bring himself to do it first, he could tell SBI everything he knew about the Egg, and Bad, and Skeppy and the drinks and Schlatt and how it all had to be connected—

Or... he could don Theseus' mask once again and tell them everything he knew that way. He'd have to be careful, separate exactly what Tommy knew and what Theseus knew, and it would take longer, but he could do it. Wilbur was right; things ran deeper than they initially seemed, and they had little time to waste. He never should have kept quiet so long in the first place.

"Wil," he called, pulling the hero out of his spiralling conspiracies. "We can meet Techno and Phil — maybe all the heroes — and we'll figure it out with them. But not on our own. And not tonight."

"We can't—" Wilbur paused as he turned around, taking in again the sight of Tommy in the baggy blue suit. "Oh. The gala."

"Yeah," Tommy said. "As soon as this is out of the way, we'll have loads of time before the Heroes' Festival to crack the case."

"You're right," Wilbur murmured, and sighed, releasing the tension in his shoulders. "Sorry, I know I kinda freaked out. I'm just... stressed."

"Still haven't slept?" Tommy asked.

Wilbur nodded miserably. "And when I'm trying to heal, it's just... exhausting. I feel delirious."

"That sucks," Tommy said, sparing the hero a sympathetic glance. "Do you think Ghostbur will recover soon?"

"I can feel him, sort of," Wilbur mused, "in the back of my mind. He feels stronger than he did earlier."

"That's good," Tommy said with a nod. "Right?"

"I hope so."

"Tommy!"

Tommy nearly startled at the call, turning to see Techno had returned. The hybrid raised an eyebrow at the large suit he was still wearing.

"Oh, that's far too big," Techno chuckled. He had another suit draped over his forearm.

"Really? I think it's perfect," Tommy deadpanned, doing a twirl and nearly tripping over the excess length in the pants.

Both Techno and Wilbur snickered, and he cracked a grin, only mildly embarrassed. Techno tossed him the new suit; it was a deep wine colour, much nicer than the blue.

"Try this one on, it's a bit smaller," Techno said. He smirked. "Plus, I think red is much more your colour."

Tommy was inclined to agree. Again, he wondered for the millionth time the extent of Techno's knowledge on the Tommy-Theseus situation. He'd clear that up soon; as soon as the gala was over. His heart thumped hard at the thought, and he exchanged a knowing glance with Wilbur. They had a *lot* to discuss when the gala was over.

The red suit fit him just shy of perfectly, a massive improvement on the previous ones he had tried on. He grinned as he admired himself in the mirror Wilbur had brought out into the room; it was odd seeing his face and messy hair paired with such smart clothes. It was different. Fun.

"Oh, that's much better," Wilbur remarked, a wide grin spreading across his lips. "Now we just need to fix your hair."

"My hair is fine—!"

"And get you a tie," Techno added. He pulled one from the pocket of his dress pants with a smirk. "Matching red with your suit."

Tommy stared at it, blinking. His cheeks warmed with a mild embarrassment. "Er... do I really need a tie?"

Wilbur raised an eyebrow at him. "It's a pretty important part of wearing a suit."

Tommy sniffed, folding his arms. "I think I'll pass."

"You don't want a tie?" Techno asked, baffled.

"Nope," Tommy insisted, swallowing a nervous laugh. "Don't need it. I'm too cool for a tie."

"It's a tie," Wilbur said. "It won't kill you."

"Do you know how to tie a tie, Tommy?" Techno inquired, the corners of his lips twitching upwards.

Tommy's face warmed. "Yes," he said quickly. Too quickly. Both Wilbur and Techno's grins turned smug.

"Tommy," Wilbur said, drawing out his name and looking all too pleased. "You should have just said!"

"I know how to tie a tie!" Tommy retorted, folding his arms as his cheeks burned scarlet.

"Oh, then I suppose you won't need us to teach you," Techno teased, tossing him the tie. Tommy caught it clumsily. "Pity. I was going to offer—"

"Okay, okay, fine," Tommy snapped. He extended his arm, offering the tie back to Techno. "Fine! You do it."

"Alright," Techno agreed cheerfully, stepping forward to take the tie and then moving behind Tommy. "Let me show you properly, and then you'll be able to do it yourself."

"And let me grab a hairbrush," Wilbur added, heading for the bedroom. "You'll be looking spick and span in no time."

"Spick and span," Tommy scoffed. "You're so old. Nobody says that anymore."

"What do they say?"

"Pog," Tommy suggested. "Swag, if you'd prefer."

Wilbur rolled his eyes. "Pog, then."

It didn't take long for the two heroes to have Tommy sorted out; Techno went over the correct technique for putting on a tie several times, and had Tommy practice it twice as many, until he was satisfied with how it looked. In the meantime, Wilbur had managed to tame his bird's nest of hair into something neat and smooth; it was an odd, unfamiliar look that Tommy was looking forward to sneakily ruffling when the man wasn't looking.

Wilbur and Techno had to help Phil in the room of the gala setting up the final details before it began, so they left Tommy in the company of Eret, Sam and Foolish and the vigilantes in the training program on their floor. Tommy was more than delighted to see Ranboo, who looked just as out of place and smart in his own suit (the pants rose a little too far above his ankles). The hybrid introduced Tommy to some of the others in the program; Tommy had to pretend he hadn't met Purpled before, but he was happy to say hello to a Connor and Michael McChill, if a little intimidated. They were both older vigilantes, who seemed much more experienced than he was, and certainly more so than Ranboo. Nevertheless, they were all friendly enough.

"We're gonna have a dance off," Purpled said, hands on his hips. He had a purple tie to go with his suit, keeping with his aesthetic. "Are you in?"

Tommy scoffed. "I hope you're ready to lose."

Purpled smirked. "So you're in."

"To win," Tommy replied confidently.

Ranboo raised an eyebrow at him. "You can't dance—"

"Hush, Ranboob," Tommy interrupted, pressing a finger to his friend's lips to silence him. "Don't speak such lies to me."

"We'll find out soon, anyway," Purpled said, grinning wide. "Not long before the gala starts."

Tommy pulled out his phone to check the time; it was half five now, and the guests would start arriving shortly. He had several texts from Tubbo in his notifications, too, and he smiled at the sight of them, stepping back from the conversation with the other vigilantes to answer his friend.

Big T: we're on our way now :)

Big T: cant wait its gonna b so fun!!!

Bigger T: hell yes man, let me know when u arrive!!

Bigger T: also

Bigger T: can you dance

Tubbo replied immediately.

Big T: a bit??

Big T: why

Tommy grinned, deciding to leave the boy in anticipation.

Bigger T: youll see

Just as he had pocketed his phone again, Sam approached the group of vigilantes with a broad smile. He, like the rest of the heroes, were dressed impeccably; Eret was donning a stunning red gown while Sam and Foolish were in custom suits, far fancier than even the one Tommy was borrowing.

"Time to head down, everybody," Sam announced with a clap of his hands. "Phil has suggested the vigilantes from the training program greet the guests at the door."

"What about me?" Tommy spoke up, raising a hand.

"I'm sure you can join them, unless Phil has other plans," Foolish said with a shrug, stepping forward with Sam. "You seem to fit in pretty well with our little group already."

I guess I'm not that different from them, really, Tommy thought, swallowing a pang of guilt. *Once a vigilante, always a vigilante.*

He did end up joining the vigilantes at the doors to the large room in which the gala was being held. It was decorated grandly; long tables with flowy white tablecloths were covered in all sorts of fancy snacks, both savoury and sweet. Balloons were arranged in bunches in the corners of the room, a few escapees having floated up to the high ceiling; streamers were hanging all around the place, and a speaker system larger than Tommy and Ranboo's TV was playing upbeat, but still classy music across the ballroom. Everything about the gala felt far too posh for Tommy to be partaking in, but he couldn't deny the buzzing excitement in his chest at the thought of the party.

Greeting people wasn't too difficult either; most of the adults who walked in, dressed in their colourful gowns and respectable suits, didn't pay the young vigilantes much mind at all. Ranboo would say "welcome, thank you for coming", or Tommy would say "enjoy", and they would receive a small nod of vague acknowledgement before the guests in question moved on. If anything, it was a little boring.

And then Schlatt walked in.

His curling horns had been bejeweled for the occasion, matching his glittering violet suit. He stopped for a moment in the doorway, observing the vast room with glittering eyes.

"Welcome, thank you for coming," Ranboo recited, not immediately catching that this was *the Schlatt* Tommy had told him about.

Tommy stared at the businessman, swallowing the anxiety that had gathered in his throat. Schlatt, unlike the other guests thus far, glanced down at the pair, his warm smile unsettling.

"Tommy, right?" he greeted. "Interesting that Philza's kept you around this long."

If Ranboo hadn't caught on before, he had now. "Funny when you treat your employees well and offer good pay without overworking them, how long they'll last."

Tommy nearly choked on air, struggling to stifle a laugh at Ranboo's bold statement. Schlatt's expression turned sour.

"And who are you?"

"I don't think my name is important to an esteemed guest like yourself," Ranboo replied coolly. "Enjoy the gala."

Schlatt scoffed, stalking off into the room without another word. A string of company followed him like sheep, not sparing Tommy and Ranboo, nor Purpled and Connor on the other side of the doorway, a second glance.

"I see what you mean," Ranboo muttered. "Bad vibes."

"How'd you know he overworks his employees?" Tommy asked, still recovering from the blow that hadn't even been directed at him. He rarely saw Ranboo so brave.

Ranboo shrugged. "I made an assumption. Seems like I was at least a little bit right."

"Or you just pissed him off," Tommy suggested.

"Tommy!"

Tommy yelped as he was nearly bowled over by a shorter figure following the end of Schlatt's entourage. A figure in a shimmering green suit to match his father's, gold jewellery encircling his own much smaller horns.

"Tubbo!" he returned with just as much enthusiasm, excitement returning in a rush as he hugged the boy happily. "You made it!"

"Of course!" the other replied cheerfully, peeling himself off of Tommy to gaze up at Ranboo with wide eyes. "Wow. You're very tall."

"Yeah, I get that a lot," Ranboo admitted with a small chuckle. "Weather's great up here, before you ask."

Tommy snorted; Ranboo looked tall next to anybody, but Tubbo was barely half his height.

"Wasn't gonna," Tubbo said with a grin. He extended his hand. "I'm Tubbo."

"Ranboo," Ranboo responded, and smiled. "Tommy's told me a bit about you."

"Really?" Tubbo asked, eyebrows raising as he glanced at Tommy in surprise. "He's talked to me about you too."

Tommy felt his cheeks warm, and decided that was a great opportunity to interrupt them. "Yes, okay, no need to snitch on me caring about my friends," he said quickly. "Come on, I think Purpled and Connor have this job handled."

"Um, no," Purpled cut in, raising an eyebrow at them. "If you're dancing, I'm dancing. Connor and Michael can greet the rest of the guests. If they're this late, they don't deserve my presence."

Connor made a face. "I didn't agree to this, but alright."

The four teens headed off eagerly before any more complaints could be uttered, nearly tripping over themselves in their haste to reach the dance floor. Not that anyone else was there; the rest of the crowd seemed to be majority adults, far more interested in talking business than competing in dance-offs. That wasn't going to stop Tommy, though.

"So this is why you asked if I could dance," Tubbo mused with a grin.

Purpled hadn't hesitated to bust a move the second they reached their spot, and Ranboo and Tubbo were watching in amusement as Tommy struggled to find his own rhythm.

"Yeah, so you could join me, not stare," Tommy quipped back, raising a challenging eyebrow at the pair. "Come on, I have a dance-off to win and you're throwing me off my groove."

"Win?" Tubbo laughed. "Sure, man."

Ranboo snorted aloud at that, and Tubbo beamed at him. Thankfully, they didn't remain standing for long, and Tommy grinned as the four danced without a care in the world. It didn't really matter if it looked good — not *really*, dance-off and all — because it was just for the fun of it, and nobody was watching them anyway.

Laughing and goofing around with his friends, it was the first time in a long time Tommy truly let himself relax, forgetting about everything that had plagued his mind like a heavy storm cloud for weeks.

"I definitely won, by the way," Purpled said, face red from all the exercise as the group finally took a break after several songs. They were standing to the side now, all still catching their breath, jackets removed in favour of rolling up the sleeves of their dress shirts. "You suck at dancing."

"Hey man, you can't just say that," Tommy retorted, hands falling into place on his hips. "We didn't even have judges."

"No, he's right, you literally cannot dance," another voice charmed in smugly, and Tommy turned to glower at Wilbur. "Aw, you've already messed up your hair and everything."

"I'd like to see you dance, bitch," Tommy muttered, though didn't complain as the hero ruffled his hair affectionately. "Were you just watching the whole time?"

"More like keeping an eye on you," Wilbur corrected him, letting his arm slip around Tommy's shoulders as he nodded to the others. "Not causing any trouble, are you?"

"No," Tommy scoffed. "There's security everywhere, I wouldn't get away with anything."

"You wouldn't?"

Tommy blinked, and decided to retract his previous statement as he folded his arms. "Okay, I definitely could. But I am respectful and kindly decided not to burden security with failing to catch me."

"Not planning any crimes, are you Tommy?" Phil asked as he too approached the group, eyes crinkling in light amusement.

"Why does everyone think that?" Tommy mumbled to himself, playing along with the joke. Ranboo and Tubbo snickered at him.

"There's actually a good few people asking about the vigilante program," Phil said, changing the subject to what he'd likely originally planned on saying. "I think it would be great if we could get a few mentor-mentee pairs together to answer some questions."

"Oh yes," Tommy agreed immediately, whirling around to stare suspiciously at Ranboo. "I'd love to see that."

Ranboo exchanged a nervous glance with Wilbur, who stood still for a moment before sighing, letting his hand fall from Tommy's shoulder altogether as he pulled away to face the boy.

"Okay. Tommy," he began, meeting the boy's gaze almost nervously. "It's about time someone told you the truth."

Tommy swallowed. "I think you're making me way more nervous about this than I need to be," he joked lamely. "Right?"

Wilbur blinked. "I'm Ranboo's mentor."

Tommy stared for a moment, uncomprehending. "Sorry?"

"I'm Ranboo's mentor," Wilbur repeated awkwardly. "I know I should've—"

"What the fuck," Tommy began, enunciating each syllable carefully, "was the reason for hiding that from me?"

Wilbur stared back, apparently just as confused. "You're not... I dunno, mad? Surprised?"

"No?" Tommy replied, baffled. "I mean, surprised? A little, I guess. But I'm glad it's you, if anyone."

Wilbur breathed a sigh that nearly sounded relieved. That didn't make sense, though. "Oh. That's good."

"That's my best friend," Tommy said, nodding at Ranboo. "I'm glad it's someone I trust who's looking after him."

"I... yeah, I am," Wilbur agreed, apparently still recovering from the confession. "That's... yeah. I was kinda worried you'd think... I dunno, that I wasn't good enough or something."

Tommy blinked. "What? Why?"

"I know I'm not the best hero," Wilbur admitted, averting his gaze. His cheeks had reddened slightly. "And you care about him a lot. Obviously. So I thought... you might want someone better. I just... I felt I owed it to him, after everything. To both of you."

"There is no one better," Tommy said honestly, and then grinned. "Except, like, Philza Minecraft."

Phil snorted a laugh behind him, and Wilbur rolled his eyes in amusement.

"And Techno, I guess," he added, though it didn't come across as entirely joking.

"No," Tommy retorted immediately, having to swallow the sudden burst of possessiveness that surprised even him with its presence. *Techno was Theseus' mentor*. "Wil — I'm glad it's you."

"Okay," Wilbur breathed, looking majorly relieved. "And, for the record, because on its own that's a dumb reason to keep it secret that long — that wasn't the only thing."

Tommy raised an eyebrow. "What was the other?"

Wilbur flushed. "Well, y'know, my whole thing with vigilantes.... I didn't want a lot of people to know. They'd think I'm going soft. I did this for Ranboo, not... vigilantes."

"You are soft, bitch," Tommy said, though wasn't entirely sure how to interpret that half of Wilbur's reasoning. Was he not warming up to the idea of vigilantes after all? His heart threatened to sink at the thought, so he packed it away for another time.

"The people interested are the same we were talking to earlier," Phil was explaining to Wilbur. "I'll catch up in a minute. I'd like to introduce Tommy to a few others first." He glanced down at his assistant with a smile. "If that's alright."

"Sure," Tommy agreed with a shrug, reaching for the jacket of his suit. He shot Tubbo and Ranboo a grin. "I'll be back in a minute."

"I'll be waiting," Tubbo replied cheerfully.

Phil threw an arm around Tommy's shoulders as he led him away from the dance floor, smiling broadly. He seemed in much better spirits now that the gala was in full swing; no more planning to do or guests to invite. He had been drowning in work for ages, even with Tommy's help to lessen the amount of it. At last, the bags under his eyes were easing up.

"No sign of the Dream Team," Tommy remarked, glancing around the crowded room.

"Or Puffy," Phil added. "They never even replied to the emails."

Tommy was reminded of the conversation he and Wilbur had had just earlier that day, and his smile faded. "Are they okay?"

Phil took his time replying. "They're all capable heroes," he settled on. "There's no reason they shouldn't be."

Tommy hummed in response, unable to completely shake the worry balled in his chest.

"Want a drink?"

"A drink?" Tommy echoed, grinning — and just like that, the worry slipped away.

Phil shot him a look. "Non-alcoholic, Tommy."

Tommy laughed. "You said it, not me. I wasn't even thinking alcohol."

"Sure, mate," Phil chuckled, and raised a hand to wave over a waiter. "I just thought you could use a refreshment after your pog dance moves."

Tommy cringed. "Did Wilbur tell you to say that? Because you don't have to. In fact, I'd rather you didn't."

Phil laughed. "And I thought I was doing great for keeping up with the modern lingo."

To Tommy's surprise, it was Hannah from reception who came over with a tray of two glasses. She was smartly dressed for the event, in a black vest over a white blouse; less colourful than her usual working attire. Tommy had thought, had she been attending the gala, she would have gone as a guest rather than a server. He said just that, taking a glass gratefully.

"How come you're serving drinks?" he asked. "I thought you'd want a break from working."

"I volunteered," Hannah replied with a shrug. "I talk enough business during the week. It's refreshing to be doing something else."

"You don't dance?" Tommy pressed, giving the woman a daring grin.

She returned the expression with a chuckle. "Not really my scene. Enjoy the drinks, gentlemen."

"Thank you, Hannah," Phil said kindly, and turned back to Tommy as she walked away again. "I'm not sure what cocktail of ingredients are in these, but apparently they're nice."

Tommy examined the pink liquid curiously, swirling it in his glass. He took a reluctant sip, immediately making a face of disgust. "Eugh — says who?"

Phil had swallowed several mouthfuls already, looking just as dissatisfied as Tommy. "Schlatt," he admitted, and cleared his throat harshly. "Though I must say, they're not exactly pleasant."

Tommy spat out the second sip he'd been about to take, alarm bells blaring in his head immediately. He stared with wide eyes at the glass he was holding, trying to convince himself the rolling in his stomach was from the sudden onset of nerves and not anything else. Then, out of the corner of his eye, he caught Hannah staring intently at them from across the room.

Hannah and Skeppy.

"Phil," he stammered with newfound urgency, turning back to his employer to see the man struggling to finish the rest of the drink. "*Phil!*"

Panic struck him like a thorned whip and he reacted without further thought; all he was thinking was *poison* and *help Phil* and his powers were lashing out of their own accord. Red magic gathered at his fingertips and around the glass at Phil's lips, wrenching it from his grasp and hurling it to the floor.

Time, for a moment, seemed to still. Tommy's heart was simultaneously dead and pounding desperately against his ribs. The glass shattered on the floor, shards scattering over their feet, glittering in the spilt liquid. Phil's eyes were wide as he met Tommy's gaze; he had *seen*, he *knew* and it was all over—

"Tommy?" he said, voice barely a whisper, but as he moved to step forward he stumbled instead, barely catching himself.

Even through the downright terror paralysing his body, Tommy didn't miss the way Phil spluttered harshly as he stared blankly at the man; even over the thundering in his ears, he heard the strained gasp that followed. And then, even worse, Phil's eyes rolled back into his head and his knees buckled and he *dropped*.

Tommy nearly fell forward in his scramble to catch the hybrid, a scream tearing itself from his throat as his back ached under the weight of Phil's body and huge wings.

"*PHIL!*"

The world around them was a hazy fog that came sharply into focus as Tommy was forcefully shoved backwards by someone he didn't recognise. Literally, he was shoved; he was sent sprawling across the floor as a doctor — security — *someone* hurried to the hero's aid, a crowd piling around Phil's collapsed body as shocked screams cut through the music. Tommy didn't even feel the impact as he fell, preoccupied with the icy fear coursing through his veins, sharper and more gripping than any he had ever experienced prior.

He could only sit and stare for a moment, not quite processing the situation as real because it *couldn't* be; but Phil's body was unmoving where he caught glimpses of it between the legs of those surrounding it. The room seemed to spin rapidly around him, though he didn't feel like he was in it; his head was in another realm entirely as his body fought the intense urge to heave. His own glass was in pieces on the ground not far from Phil's; it wasn't helping at all in serving as a reminder of the last time he'd lost his composure.

Schlatt, Phil, poison, collapsed, dying, poison, help, Hannah, Skeppy—

In the overwhelming mess of it all, he caught a glimpse of said pair quietly making their leave through a back door to the room.

And then he was *angry*.

The heat of his rage was a slap to the face as it chased out the cold of his prior fear, the contrast so numbing he couldn't focus on anything but Hannah and Skeppy as he threw himself to his feet. The shouting and clamour around him faded to naught as he took chase; all he knew was the pounding of his shoes against linoleum flooring and the quick huffs of his breath as he ran. He nearly tore the door from its hinges in his haste to open it, his magic coursing through his muscles and offering him extra strength; Hannah and Skeppy were already at the other end of the narrow hallway on the other side, and the former had the audacity to flash him a triumphant smirk as they continued on their way.

Tommy saw *red*.

"Get back here!" he screamed, tearing after them as fast as his legs could go. "I'll kill you!"

He slammed through the door at the end of the hall just moments after they did, head reeling and lungs straining with the effort of his sprint but he didn't *care*, it could burn him and it wouldn't matter as much as catching them would, he couldn't let them go, he had to make them *pay*.

There was no sign of them in the next hallway, only one door swinging where the others were still. Tommy shoved through it without a second thought, grim satisfaction curling in his stomach as he caught a glimpse of Hannah's hair before the two disappeared behind another door at the end of the next hall. The sign for the elevators was hanging from the ceiling; he had them now, he knew where they were going and he could stop them and—

And the door was *locked*.

"No, no, no," Tommy muttered, trying the handle again and again to no avail. "No, *fuck*, no!"

He threw his entire body weight against the door, ignoring the burst of pain in his side. He didn't make so much as a dent — so he did it again. And again. He couldn't let them get away, he couldn't fail that too—

"Tommy!"

"No!" Tommy shouted, the word catching in his throat like a thorn. He threw himself at the door again desperately, biting back a noise of pain as his head thumped hard against the wood. "I can't — I can't—"

"Tommy, stop!"

And there were arms around him, pulling him back, keeping him from his goal — he fought against them viciously, quickly tiring as his body ached in complaint.

"Let go!" he screamed, reaching thoughtlessly for his magic to support him to find even that support had abandoned him. "Please, I can't—"

"Tommy," Techno cut in, voice firm but soft in a way only he had perfected. "Tommy, you're hurting yourself."

"I can't let them go — they hurt Phil," Tommy argued weakly, and in a horrible instant everything caught up with him like a bullet to the heart. His legs collapsed beneath him, exhausted, and he fell into Techno's arms as a sob ripped itself from his throat. "Tech—"

"I know," Techno murmured, holding him tight to his chest, and only then did Tommy notice the anguish in the older hero's voice. It felt like grief. "I know."

Tommy clung to the hybrid desperately as his shoulders shook, throat and eyes burning as he cried. His entire body was sore with the efforts of his pursuit, nausea still broiling on the inside with a horrible force.

He pulled himself together as soon as his sobs had subsided enough to do so, sure his face was still red and blotchy and legs as wobbly as his chin but determined to get up and move. He couldn't stay and do nothing; Phil was the one who needed help, not him, and staying felt like giving up on him. He refused to do that.

"Is he okay?" he asked, voice hoarse.

He couldn't see Techno's face where it was still tucked over his shoulder, but he could picture the sorrowful reluctance that came with his answer.

"They're taking him to the medbay," Techno replied carefully, unable to completely hide the shake in his own voice. "If anyone can help him, Charlie can."

Tommy wiped furiously at his eyes again, choosing to ignore how none of that was a 'yes'. "Where's Wil? And Ranboo?"

"They went with him," Techno said quietly. He pulled back just enough to meet Tommy's gaze. "Tommy, did you drink any of it?"

Tommy stared, heart and head pounding in tandem. "Just a sip," he whispered. "But I don't know that mine was poisoned."

"I'm not taking that chance," Techno stated, standing immediately. "We're going to the medbay."

"But Hannah and Skeppy—"

"The tower's going into lockdown, security will deal with them," Techno said firmly. He helped Tommy up, not letting go of him for a second. "They're not my priority right now. You are."

"But—"

"I'm not losing two of you," Techno snapped.

Something small and terrified made itself known inside Tommy's heart. "But we're not losing Phil, right?"

Techno blinked, and took a shaky inhale. "No, of course not."

Tommy wasn't sure he believed him; he had never heard Techno so shaken. "It was Schlatt," he blurted, suddenly recalling the importance of that detail. "Schlatt is the one behind it."

Techno stared at him. "How can you be sure?" he asked — though it wasn't a skeptical question. He believed him.

"Skeppy," Tommy said, spitting out the name with a venom. "He was there before. In the other city — with the drinks. He works for Schlatt. It *has* to be Schlatt, I know it is."

"Like I said, the tower's being locked down," Techno replied, giving his arm a comforting squeeze. "All the guests will be questioned before they're let go for the night. I'll see to it that

Schlatt is investigated thoroughly."

To Tommy's frustration, he was struggling to keep down further tears as Techno did his best to reassure him. "He hurt *Dad*," he choked out, barely aware of his words — only the dwindling anger and still prevalent distress pulling on his heartstrings.

"I know," Techno whispered, quick to pull Tommy into another tight embrace. "I know. And we'll catch him. I promise."

Chapter End Notes

things are really heating up now, huh :)

Organised Crime

Chapter Summary

In the aftermath of the gala, Tommy decides to find out the real truth of who's behind it all.

CW// emetophobia, descriptions of illness/coma

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for [notes](#)

"Drink," Charlie directed. "And take this. You'll feel better."

Tommy took the glass a little skeptically, examining the yellow-hued liquid through narrowed eyes. After another moment, he took the bucket he was being offered too. "What's this for?"

"Just drink," Charlie said, and made a motion to Techno Tommy didn't quite catch.

They were in the medbay, in a room adjacent to where Phil was staying. Wilbur and Ranboo were with him; he had been admitted as soon as he'd collapsed, undergoing immediate treatment for the poison.

Tommy, on the other hand, had just been seated in a chair in the next room over and told to drink some weird looking concoction as soon as Techno had explained that he had sipped from a poisoned glass too. Tommy had never met Charlie before, but he seemed nice enough, if a little firm. His skin was tinged green under his white doctor's coat, hair more gooey than... well, hair. He was a slime hybrid, blessed with a healing enhancement.

"Drink," Techno insisted, more gently. "It'll help."

Tommy took a mouthful of the liquid, immediately cringing at the foul taste; it was worse than even the poison had been, causing his stomach to roll with discomfort.

"The whole thing," Charlie said, leaning back against a cabinet as he watched.

Tommy scrunched up his nose at that, though downed the rest of the glass quickly in order to minimise the length of time the sour taste was on his tongue. He immediately gagged, stomach contracting.

"Bucket," Charlie said.

Techno steadied the bucket in Tommy's lap, and just in time as the teen emptied the contents of his stomach into it unceremoniously. He heaved again several times in succession without so much as a second to breathe; it kept coming until there was nothing left but bile. Tommy groaned, wrapping his arms around himself at the unpleasant sensations.

"Here," Charlie spoke up again, handing him another glass of a clear liquid and a tissue. "It's just water."

Tommy took this glass far more gratefully, swishing and spitting out the vile taste of vomit lingering in his mouth before wiping his lips. "Thanks," he croaked.

"Sorry to do that to you," Charlie admitted with a small smile. "I don't think the amount of poison you ingested was enough to do any harm, but better safe than sorry to clear any traces from your system straight away."

"S fine," Tommy mumbled, voice a little hoarse. Techno handed the bucket to Charlie, rubbing Tommy's back in slow circles.

"Do we know what the poison was?" Wilbur asked, and Tommy turned around, surprised by the hero's sudden presence in the room. Ranboo was with him; the two acknowledged him with worried glances. "You okay, Tommy?"

Tommy gave the taller a weak thumbs up. "I only had a sip."

"Fucking... Primes," Wilbur breathed, crouching next to Tommy's chair to press a hand to his forehead. "You feel warm. Charlie, are we sure he's okay?"

"If he begins to show any strong adverse effects, I'll have to take bloods," Charlie said. "Until then, I have no reason to believe the poison did him any damage."

"I can't believe this," Wilbur whispered, mostly to himself. His face was pale.

Ranboo was holding himself tightly where he lingered by the doorway. "Who would want to poison...?"

"Schlatt," Tommy muttered darkly. "It was Schlatt."

Wilbur's fists curled. "Did you see him? Did he give you the drinks?"

"No," Tommy admitted. "Hannah did."

"Hannah from reception?!"

"Yeah," he replied grimly. "She was in on it. And Skeppy was there too — he was there before. That's how.... It's gotta be Schlatt, I know it."

Techno stood from his seat. "I'm gonna have a chat with security about that."

Wilbur nodded seriously. "Keep us updated."

Techno gave a nod of affirmation as he glanced around the group, eyes lingering on Tommy for a moment before he left. Tommy shifted uncomfortably in his seat.

"Can I see Phil?" he asked, a little hesitantly.

"Of course," Wilbur replied immediately, and then glanced at Charlie. "If the doctor agrees."

Charlie gave a nod. "I wouldn't usually allow this many visitors, but I understand this is a special case. Though Tommy... don't expect much. He's asleep — has been since we brought him in."

Tommy nodded, not sure he was prepared for the consequences of Phil waking up yet anyway. *He saw me use my magic. He knows.*

Even at that, he was equally unprepared for the sight that awaited him in Phil's room. Behind drawn curtains for privacy, his employer was lying flat on his back in a hospital bed, wings carefully manoeuvred beneath him so they were out of the way. He was hooked up to numerous machines, all beeping or buzzing in one way or another, and his skin was sickly pale, nearly blue around his lips. He didn't so much as twitch when the group entered, nor when Wilbur dutifully took a seat at his bedside and placed a hand over his. He was completely unresponsive; he could have been dead if not for the shallow rising and falling of his chest.

Tommy was sick to his stomach just looking at the man; he'd never, even in his worst nightmares, seen Phil so *weak*.

"Here," Wilbur said softly, beckoning Tommy over.

Tommy gingerly sat in a chair beside Wilbur, unable to tear his eyes from Phil; he was only vaguely aware of Ranboo's presence behind him as a hand gripped his shoulder reassuringly.

"He's...."

"In a coma," Charlie finished for him, picking up a clipboard from Phil's bed and making note of his vitals. "I expect he'll live, given he has stabilised, at least."

Tommy glanced at the doctor, panic rooting itself firmly in his chest. "And he'll wake up, right?"

Charlie met his gaze, solemn. "It's early stages yet," he replied. "I don't want to make any promises I can't keep."

Tommy's breath caught in his throat, and he nodded, forgetting for a moment how to inhale. Phil was going to wake up — he *had* to. Tommy wasn't sure he could live with himself if he had failed the man that badly. He had been right there; he should have realised sooner, should have reacted faster, could have prevented all of this if only he had been paying more attention....

Charlie's phone buzzed, and some of the tension in his face eased as he read whatever notification had popped up.

"What is it?" Wilbur asked.

"You were asking if we knew what poison it was," Charlie said, sounding relieved. "We do now."

"How?" Ranboo piped up, curious.

"Sam was able to grab a sample of the drinks you spilled," Charlie explained, glancing at Tommy. "We've been running them through the lab as long as Phil's been up here, and we just got some definite results."

"That's good, right?" Tommy asked, wary.

Charlie nodded. "Very good. We had Phil on a general treatment for most poisons, but now we can give him a much more exact antidote to efficiently counter the poison's effects. They're manufacturing it in the medical lab right now."

"What was the poison?" Wilbur asked, not completely reassured.

"They call it Hybrid's Bane," Charlie replied. "A toxin that targets the key gene in hybrids that differentiates us from other enhanced individuals. Most people would be able to digest it without any issue, but for hybrids it's lethal in even small doses."

"What does that mean for Phil?" Tommy inquired nervously.

Charlie met his gaze seriously. "It means he's very lucky to be alive right now."

"He was gonna drink the whole thing," Tommy recalled, voice quiet. "I stopped him."

Wilbur turned to him, surprised, and even Charlie was examining him with newfound curiosity.

"How did you know?" the doctor asked. "That it was poisoned?"

Tommy swallowed. "It tasted weird," he answered honestly. "Not just weird — *wrong*. It made my stomach feel bad. And then I saw Hannah with Skeppy, and that's when I knew."

The room was silent for a moment, with the exception of Phil's countless machines still beeping and whirring, and Tommy flushed. Had he said something wrong?

"Are you part hybrid at all, Tommy?" Charlie inquired, watching him closely.

"No," Tommy responded, and then frowned. "I mean, I don't think so."

"Your parents — are they both human? Or their parents?"

"I never knew my parents," Tommy said.

Charlie, thankfully, didn't make a big deal out of that piece of information. He only nodded thoughtfully. "You shouldn't have been able to taste the poison as a full human. I'd wager there's a hybrid somewhere in your family tree."

Tommy blinked. "That I have the gene? But I'm not—"

"Not everyone who carries the gene has the hybrid traits to show for it," Charlie explained. "It depends on the type of hybrid. Some are recessive, some are dominant; hence why some hybrids are rarer than others."

"Oh," was all Tommy could find it in himself to say. He wasn't sure why this information was more upsetting than it was surprising; somehow, it made him feel farther from his parents than ever. There were a million and one things about himself he'd never know for sure, all because he didn't know them.

"Wow, Tommy," Wilbur remarked, trying to lighten the mood with a small smile. "I guess you're not all human after all."

I never was to begin with, Tommy thought numbly, pushing his magic further down. He didn't reply.

Charlie broke the silence again as he cleared his throat. "Well, I can't do much except wait until the lab brings me that antidote. Wilbur? Do you want me to check your injury?"

Wilbur made a face. "I'm guessing that's less of a suggestion and more of an order."

"Sounds about right," Charlie agreed, amused. "I'll be in the next room."

Wilbur sighed as he watched the doctor leave, before pushing himself to his feet. He didn't move for a moment, shutting his eyes.

Tommy stood too, uncertain. "Do you want someone to go with you?"

"No, no, it's okay," Wilbur said, forcing his shoulders to relax as he opened his eyes again. "Stay with Phil."

Tommy nodded. "Okay."

Wilbur stared at him, eyebrows knitting together, and then stepped forward to pull him into a tight hug. Tommy accepted it gladly, swallowing back the sudden urge to cry again.

"I'm so glad you're okay," Wilbur whispered. He inhaled sharply. "Fuck, if anything had happened to you...."

"I'm okay," Tommy assured him, grounding himself against the hero's silky dress shirt and ignoring the wobble in his voice.

"Thank you," Wilbur said softly, and reluctantly pulled away. "You saved Phil's life."

Tommy's heart stuttered, encased with guilt. "I should've done more—"

"No, don't," Wilbur cut him off sternly. "Phil owes you his life. You couldn't have done better."

Tommy wiped at his eyes, and nodded. "Thank you."

"Thank *you*," Wilbur repeated, and gave his arm a squeeze before making his way to the door. He glanced back at the pair. "I'll be back in a minute. Mind each other."

Ranboo nodded, and they watched Wilbur leave. It was a minute before either of them moved, Tommy still focusing hard on collecting himself; eventually they settled into the seats at Phil's bedside. Tommy could barely stand looking at the man in his state, but held his hand regardless, like Wilbur had done. It was better than doing nothing.

"I heard talking to them helps," Ranboo murmured, after a while.

Tommy glanced up at him. "What?"

"That they can hear you," Ranboo said, shrugging. "I dunno if it's true, but I'm sure he'd appreciate knowing you were there if it is."

"Yeah," Tommy agreed quietly, and swallowed any embarrassment at the thought. It was Phil he was talking to, after all; even if he couldn't reply, it was still him. "Hey, Philza Minecraft."

He was met with silence. Of course. He wasn't sure why he'd half been hoping for otherwise.

"The gala was really fun," he began, uncertain. "Well, until it wasn't. But you, um, organised it really well."

He took a breath. The words felt meaningless, pointless; like it wasn't really Phil he was speaking to. He took a second to compose himself again, and then looked at the man — *really* looked at him. How the creases in his forehead were deeper than ever, the bags under his eyes more pronounced when they had just been lightening up; he looked at the tube running into his nose, heard the rhythmic beeping of the heart monitor and noted the other

dozen machines scratching live graphs of whatever vitals they were monitoring into their screens. He looked at Phil's wings, folded with care beneath him but still unruly, feathers sticking out at odd angles and the sheen less healthy than it had been. They needed to be preened.

He took another breath, blinking away the blur in his vision. He refused to cry again.

"I'm sorry, Phil," he whispered shakily. "This is all my fault."

"Tommy," Ranboo breathed, glancing at him in concern.

Tommy pushed on, ignoring him. "They said they'd go after everyone I loved," he continued, voice wobbling. Another breath. Compose. "Ranboo, Wilbur... now you. And every time it gets worse, and I still do nothing. Next it'll be Techno, right? And I don't even know how to stop them. I don't know what they want from me."

Phil made no response except to continue to breathe. Somehow, that only made it all worse.

"The truth is I'm scared," Tommy whispered, shutting his eyes tight to lock in the tears that threatened to escape. He laughed weakly. "Primes, I'm fucking terrified, Phil. And you know now. You saw. And maybe you'll hate me for lying.... *I hate me for lying.*" *Breathe.* "I know I need help, and I need to tell people. I know, and I will. Primes, it's just...."

At some point, Ranboo's hand had covered his own, where it was pressed over Phil's. He opened his eyes, shooting his friend a wobbly smile.

"I think Techno knows," he admitted, when he was sure he could speak again without breaking. "I think he's known for a while. That he's waiting for me to come to him first. And I can't even do that." He gave himself another moment before continuing. "And now I have to tell Wilbur, too. But even if he hates me... I'll still do it. I won't let anyone else get hurt because of me." He paused, taking in Phil's still body again. "I just need time, Phil. I want you to wake up. Primes, I really, really do. I need your help... but if you wake up before I'm ready, please, just... let me do it. You don't owe me that, I know, but...."

He broke off, distracted by the sudden buzzing of his phone in his pocket. He reached for the device, Ranboo watching him curiously.

"Who is it?"

"It's Tubbo," Tommy replied, mood falling instantly. He let go of Phil's hand.

"Are you gonna answer?"

Tommy was debating the same question in his head. He met Ranboo's gaze, expression grim, and picked up the call.

"Tommy!" Tubbo's voice buzzed through the phone; there was a lot of background noise, wherever he was. *"I've been trying to text you — you weren't picking up—"*

Tommy's jaw tensed. "Did you know?"

"What?"

"The drinks," Tommy emphasised, clenching his fists. "That they were poisoned. Did you know?"

Tubbo was quiet for a beat. *"No,"* he replied, and it sounded genuine. *"No, Primes, Tommy, if I had known I wouldn't have let you—"*

"Swear it," Tommy insisted, gripping his phone so hard he was nearly worried it would break.

"I swear," Tubbo said. Tommy had never heard him so serious. *"On my mother."*

Okay. Tommy took a deep breath, forcing some of the tension from his muscles and ignoring how his eyes were welling up again. "Where are you right now?"

"Still at the gala," Tubbo replied. The shouting in the background grew in volume. *"I'm with some people from Dad's company — I don't know where he is — everyone's freaking out and security won't let us leave."*

Tommy pushed himself to his feet. "Get to the nearest bathroom," he instructed. "I'll meet you there."

"Tommy—" Ranboo cut in. Tommy ignored him.

"Will they let me go?" Tubbo asked, unsure.

"It's the bathroom, just say it's an emergency," Tommy said. "I'll be there. Give me five minutes."

Ranboo stood from his chair too as soon as Tommy hung up. "Tommy, I don't think it's a good idea to leave right now—"

"It's just Tubbo, I'll be safe," Tommy said, brushing him off.

"Wilbur's gonna freak out if you're gone."

"Tell him I'm gone to the bathroom," Tommy said, heading for the door. "It's not a lie."

"Tommy," Ranboo called, sharply this time.

Tommy startled, pausing to turn back and acknowledge his friend.

"The tower's under lockdown for a reason," Ranboo said, eyebrows knitting together with worry. "It could be dangerous. You shouldn't go."

"I have to," Tommy insisted, meeting the hybrid's gaze. "It's *Tubbo*, he might know something that could help us. That could help *Phil*."

"Security is questioning everybody. If he knows anything, they'll tell us about it."

Security isn't Tubbo's friend. "I won't be long. Cover me," Tommy said, shooting Ranboo an apologetic glance before hurrying out the door.

He had to take the stairs, as the elevators were all locked; it wasn't so bad jogging down that many flights of stairs, though he dreaded having to go back up. He was still lightheaded as he struggled to piece together the conversation he was about to have in his mind. How does one politely phrase, "*is your dad trying to kill my dad?*" He blinked hard. *My employer. Not....*

It didn't take him too long to reach the floor of the gala, thankfully without running into anyone, either. The hallways on this floor were being patrolled by tower security, but even then they weren't too difficult to avoid. He ducked into the bathroom nearest the ballroom the second the coast was clear, shutting the door behind him.

"Tommy," Tubbo breathed, glancing up from where he'd been leaning over a sink.

Tommy ignored him, hurrying past to kick open each stall and ensure nobody was there to eavesdrop. Once he was sure they were alone, he turned to acknowledge his friend and immediately lost whatever cold front he'd been attempting to put on.

Tubbo looked *stressed*.

"Are you okay?" Tubbo asked him, as though he wasn't the one who had splashed his face with water and still couldn't wash away the distress in his expression.

"Yeah," Tommy replied quietly. "You?"

"I'm okay," Tubbo said softly. "Is Philza...?"

"He's alive," Tommy mumbled. He wished he had more confidence in his own words. "He'll be okay."

Tubbo nodded, exhaling slowly. "Okay. Yeah. That's good."

They stood in tense silence at the end of that exchange. Tommy pulled at the sleeves of his dress shirt, still building up the bravery to ask what he needed to.

Tubbo got there first.

"You think my dad did it."

Tommy stared at him, unsure how best to proceed. "Yes."

Tubbo nodded vaguely, averting his gaze. "I just figured, 'cause of the way you were asking me on the phone, and...." He trailed off, anxious. "How do you know?"

Tommy blinked. "Am I right?"

"I don't know," Tubbo said honestly. He looked... sad. Resigned.

Suddenly, Tommy felt like the evidence he'd been so sure of wasn't nearly enough. How do you tell someone you think their father is an attempted murderer?

"On the trip, when we first met," he began, gesturing vaguely. "Skeppy was there. There was this whole thing about drinks — they were being served to that meeting, and two of them were marked with a 'P'." He still didn't know what that *P* had stood for; Philza and Puffy? Poison? The case had been closed on all that, but he was sure something had been covered up in the process. "At the time I thought someone was trying to poison someone else. I *still* think that. Then tonight — Skeppy again, and what happened with Phil.... Skeppy works for Schlatt. It's gotta be him, right?"

Tubbo shifted his weight where he stood, looking uncomfortable. Tommy's heart panged.

"I need to know," he said, more gently this time. "I need to know for sure. Would he?"

Tubbo met his gaze for a fleeting moment, eyes shining and hands fidgeting restlessly with the end of his blazer.

"He might," he whispered.

Tommy released a breath he hadn't realised he was holding. The admission was still surprising, even if it had been what he'd come here for; it hit like a punch to the stomach, that Tubbo would agree his own father might have been behind a plot to murder Phil. He couldn't even imagine how horrible Tubbo felt, saying it aloud; the boy looked physically ill, eyes trained on the floor. A thought struck him; just how bad of a father was Schlatt, that his own son would admit something like this to someone he — in all honesty — barely knew?

Tommy didn't know what to say. He wasn't sure there was anything *to* say, anything that could continue from that. Hearing it didn't feel satisfactory at all. It only made his stomach clench.

"He won't talk to me about it," Tubbo said, breaking the silence. "He would never tell me anything about something like this. I don't know how you could prove it."

Tommy frowned. "Does he talk to anyone about it?"

Tubbo looked uncertain, like he didn't know how much he could say. "He talks to Dream. A lot. I don't know about what, but..."

"Dream?" Tommy echoed, eyebrows furrowing. "So he's not dead. He didn't come to the gala, though."

"He's.... I dunno," Tubbo mumbled. "He's weird. I don't like him."

"So you couldn't talk to Dream about it?"

"Primes, no," Tubbo said immediately, shaking his head with vigour. "He'd probably tell Dad I was snooping. He definitely wouldn't tell me anything."

"And the rest of the Dream Team?" Tommy asked, chewing on his cheek. "Puffy?"

"I don't see them around," Tubbo mumbled. "It's mainly just Dream. He's the only one I ever see going into Dad's office."

"That's where they talk?" Tommy inferred.

Tubbo nodded. "Never anywhere else. And there's not a chance I could eavesdrop, he's got cameras on the door. He would know."

Tommy hummed, deep in thought. An idea began to emerge from the depths of his mind. "We could bug it, maybe."

Tubbo blinked. "What?"

"We could bug his office. We'd be able to eavesdrop on every conversation he ever has in there," Tommy said.

Tubbo didn't seem convinced. "I'd never be able to get in there," he said. "Dad never leaves. When he does, security guards the door."

"You can't, maybe," Tommy admitted, a nervous energy beginning to thrum in his veins. "But I could. With your help."

Tubbo stared at him. "You mean... like a vigilante?"

Tommy took a shaky inhale. *For Phil*. "Yeah," he said. "Like Theseus."

"How are you getting in?" Tubbo asked, perking up a little.

"The window?" Tommy suggested.

Tubbo raised an eyebrow. "His office is on the twenty-fifth floor. The window doesn't open enough for anyone to fit through anyway, even if you could get up there."

"I could break it?"

"Yeah, he'll never know anyone was in there that way," Tubbo remarked, and Tommy nearly smiled at the sarcasm.

"Okay," he agreed. "No window. What about the inside?"

"Like I said," Tubbo replied, "he's in there all day and it's guarded during lunch breaks and at night when he's not."

"What if you could draw him out?" Tommy asked, gears turning in his head. "Distract him. Something outside of the security guard schedule."

Tubbo's eyebrows rose a fraction. "Maybe... but there's still cameras everywhere."

Tommy frowned, stumped. And then, like an honest-to-Prime light bulb turning on behind his eyes, he recalled a glorious piece of information.

"A lot of technology isn't made to be compatible with magic," Phil had said, when they were discussing any possible camera footage of Ranboo's last enderwalk.

"I can shut them down," he said. "Probably. Use my magic to overload the camera system."

"You can do that?" Tubbo asked, eyes widening.

Tommy smiled weakly. "In theory."

"Woah," Tubbo breathed, impressed. "Okay. So that's security and the cameras out of the way. But you can't just walk around the halls in your suit... and you could be recognised without it."

Tommy frowned. Okay, that one was an issue.

"Unless..." Tubbo continued, eyebrows furrowing in thought. "There's a huge vent system that runs through the whole building. It's all connected. You'd be able to get in from the outside, and make your way straight into the office."

"Vents?" Tommy parroted, immediately disliking the idea. "Will I fit?"

"They're a bit of a squeeze, but I can," Tubbo said, grinning. He met Tommy's baffled gaze and elaborated. "They're a great hiding spot, when you don't want to be found."

Tommy decided to put that last statement to the side for later analysis. He swallowed his nerves at the thought of squeezing into vents for that long, focusing on the *how* for now. "I won't know which way to go," he pointed out. "And it'll be dark up there, right?"

Tubbo hummed thoughtfully. "The building blueprints would show the vent system. It would be like having a map."

"I'm guessing you don't have those," Tommy deadpanned.

"No," Tubbo confirmed, "but I can probably get them. There's a huge storage room in the basement; all company files are kept in physical form for backup. I know one of the guys who works down there."

Tommy raised an eyebrow, skeptical. "And this guy will just give it to you?"

"He likes me," Tubbo said, grinning. "I babysit his son, Michael. I'll say it's for a school project."

Tommy blinked. "It's summer."

"I'm homeschooled," Tubbo replied. "So. We have our plan."

Tommy blew out a long breath. There was a lot of *'probably's* in this plan. "I guess we're doing this."

"What about the bug, though?" Tubbo asked curiously. "I don't have anything like that."

"I have an idea for it," Tommy replied. He'd had it in mind since suggesting they bug Schlatt's office. "Let me handle that. You just text me the location of the building. Let me know when you have the blueprints."

Tubbo opened his mouth to reply, but paused, face falling as his gaze moved over Tommy's shoulder. Tommy whipped around, heart dropping.

Techno stood in the doorway of the bathroom, expression grim. "I found him," he said into his phone. "We'll be back up in a second."

Tommy smiled weakly at the hero as he hung up the call. "I think I'm in trouble," he murmured to Tubbo.

"Nobody takes this long in the bathroom, which was your first mistake," Techno remarked, pocketing his phone.

"Did Ranboo snitch?" Tommy asked.

"He was just as worried as Wilbur and I, so don't blame him," Techno replied. He sighed, stepping forward to put a hand on Tommy's shoulder. "Pretty stupid of you, going off on your own right now."

"I wasn't alone," Tommy argued, gesturing to Tubbo, who looked like he'd really rather not be gestured at.

"That Schlatt's kid?" Techno asked, raising an eyebrow at the shorter teen. "What, were you interrogating him?"

"No," Tubbo cut in, a little awkwardly. He held out his hand. "I'm Tubbo."

Techno eyed his hand and didn't take it. "I would advise you get back to your dad, kid."

Tubbo blinked, and then startled into action. "Yes," he agreed, heading for the door. "Sorry, Mr. Blade sir."

"Text me!" Tommy called after him.

Tubbo nodded seriously and hurried out the door.

Techno glanced sideways at Tommy. "Wanna tell me what you were doing down here on your own? Because you better have a damn good reason for being so foolish."

Tommy swallowed nervously. "I guess that means I'm in trouble."

"Someone tried to poison you today!" Techno snapped, tensing. "You're damn lucky you're not in a hospital bed like Phil is right now."

Tommy bit his cheek, quickly deciding against arguing back. Techno had a point; Phil's drink hadn't been the only lethal one. "I didn't even know I was part hybrid, there's no way anyone else could have," he reasoned. "They probably just put poison in both in case I took his glass and he took mine."

"Primes, Tommy, don't take that chance," Techno retorted. He led Tommy to the door of the bathroom, guiding him back towards the stairs. "What if something happened to you?"

"Well, nothing happened, and I'm fine," Tommy pointed out calmly.

"There is an attempted murderer still in this building as we speak," Techno growled. "Going off on your own was reckless."

Tommy glanced sideways at the hero, and finally caught the degree of worry in his expression. He looked away again. "I'm sorry."

"Yeah, well..." Techno trailed off with a huff. "I'm not gonna give out any more, because Prime knows Wilbur will make up for it."

Tommy frowned as they began their long climb back to the medbay floor. "Do you really think someone's after me, too?"

"I don't know," Techno sighed. "I don't want to scare you, Tommy, but I don't want to rely on the chance that they're not. We just want to keep you safe."

"I'm sorry," Tommy said again, as honestly as he could. He glanced curiously at the hero. "Did they catch Hannah and Skeppy? Or Schlatt?"

"Hannah and Skeppy must have escaped before the tower was put under lockdown, and Schlatt's denying any involvement with the whole thing, of course," Techno replied wearily. "Until we find any incriminating evidence, it's innocent until proven guilty, I'm afraid."

"Shit," Tommy mumbled.

So he really would be putting on Theseus' suit again; he doubted Schlatt had been messy enough to leave any trace of his involvement, which meant the only way they were bringing him to justice was through his and Tubbo's plan. The sooner the bug was in place, the sooner they'd all be safe, and things could return to the way they were.

Come on, Tubbo. I'm just waiting on you.

Chapter End Notes

friendly reminder i appreciate u all so much, your comments literally make my day
thank u have a great day <333

The Calm and the Storm

Chapter Summary

Things at the tower get serious while Tommy waits to hear from Tubbo.

CW// gun violence, detailed descriptions of injury/illness, implied panic attack, mentions of coma

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for [notes](#)

Tommy and Ranboo were staying in the tower until further notice after the disaster that had been the gala. Techno had been pretty spot on when it came to Wilbur's reaction to Tommy running off; the hero was furious, but mostly terrified. Security had nothing but dead leads on the attempt on Phil's life, which meant it was far too dangerous for Tommy or Ranboo to be out of sight, even for a moment. After all, it very well could have been an attempt on Tommy's life, too. Until they caught whoever was behind it — Schlatt, Tommy was sure — they couldn't take any risks.

The spare room on SBI's floor had been set up for the two of them after another night on the couch; there were two beds against opposite walls, the room otherwise big and bare and empty. There was a slight echo when they spoke in there. It was strange.

The other vigilantes were staying on the floor that was being rebuilt to accommodate them. Construction was still underway, technically, but had been halted for the time being to let them stay there; enough rooms had been put together to house the few people in the training program, even if it wasn't the most comfortable.

Three days after the gala, Wilbur took Tommy and Ranboo back to their apartment to collect their belongings. That was when it really hit Tommy how serious things were; everyone had been on edge for days, sure, but suddenly he was facing the reality of it all. There was no telling when they'd be staying in their apartment again. This was about much more than just the gala, and poison, and Phil; Wilbur hadn't forgotten their conversation prior to the event. They wouldn't be going home until *everything* had been cleared up.

Tommy hated considering what that entailed.

They left their apartment with two bags of clothes, and any perishable food in their kitchen. Tommy carefully packed his suit, and pretended he couldn't still feel the ash in the material.

He wasn't ready to become Theseus again... but he had to.

In Phil's absence, Techno had been named the temporary team leader of SBI and hence taken over all of Phil's jobs in addition to his own. Tommy helped out where he could, still being paid as an assistant, though it didn't do much to lessen the load. He rarely saw Techno anymore; he only ever left Phil's office to attend meetings with the other heroes of the tower or the council. He didn't have the luxury of taking breaks.

It was because of this that Wilbur had been cleared for patrol again — far too early, according to Charlie — and was out working double time to cover both his and Techno's assigned districts. Ghostbur still had yet to be heard from, but a night of full sleep at long last was all the reassurance Wilbur needed to don his hero suit again and head out into the city. It was Sam who often accompanied him, as Fundy was still missing, leaving his lab unattended to.

It worked perfectly for Tommy's plan. Tubbo hadn't contacted Tommy since the gala, and though he was worried, there was nothing he could do except prepare for the mission and uphold his end of the deal. He still had access to the lab, after all the time he had spent in there working on Ranboo's emergency button, and he didn't need an excuse to pay the floor a visit. It was in a part of the tower deemed safe for them, and indulging in his hobbies wasn't something he'd be questioned on. It was ideal for preparing the bug.

SBI's old comms were still set to the side from when Sam had decided to retire them. Tommy distinctly recalled Wilbur's never turning off, and so ran out of battery often — it sounded like the perfect base for a bug.

It didn't take too long to adjust the comm to work the way he needed it to, even if it was a much longer process than it would have been with Sam's help. The piece was small and compact, fit for an ear; perfect for hiding in an office. The only downside was its size made it much more difficult to work on, but not impossible. With the help of a few YouTube tutorials and a WikiHow article, he was able to attach a chunky battery connection to it. With a little luck, it would record audio from Schlatt's office for weeks.

It had been nearly a week since the gala when Tubbo finally texted him; he had been visiting Phil with Wilbur and Techno. It was rare the three of them had a free moment together anymore; even rarer that Ranboo could join them. Eret had temporarily taken the new vigilante under his wing while Wilbur was out patrolling more often. Any time at least three of them had a break together, they'd visit Phil. Already, it had become a routine of sorts.

"He's recovering really well," Charlie had explained. "Getting the antidote into his system that early has really helped."

"Don't sell yourself short," Techno murmured to the doctor. "Your enhancement has done wonders for him."

Charlie smiled. "I wish I could do more, but I've at least prompted his body to return to working order."

"Is he gonna wake up soon?" Tommy asked, stomach curling.

"I would expect him to in the next few days," Charlie said brightly. "Though he will need time to fully recover. Comas induced by toxins in the body are generally less severe than those caused by brain trauma, but a coma is still a coma."

"But he *will* fully recover?" Wilbur inquired, eyebrows raising.

Charlie nodded confidently. "I see no reason why he wouldn't."

The wave of relief that settled over the room was palpable. Tommy sighed, sitting back into his chair at Phil's bedside; at least, even if Schlatt hadn't yet been caught, he had failed. Phil was going to be okay. All Tommy had to do was prove him guilty, and that would be more than half of their current problems solved.

"The press is still waiting for a statement on his condition," Charlie added, leaning back against the wall. He met Techno's gaze pointedly. "As team leader of SBI, it's your call to make."

"We'll wait," Techno replied gruffly. "Until Phil's awake again. It should be his call, not mine."

"That's fair," Charlie agreed with a nod. He glanced between the three, before heading for the door. "I'll leave you some space."

"Thanks, Charlie," Wilbur called after him. He let out a sigh as the doctor left, leaning forward to take Phil's hand. "Primes, old man. You've really given us all a scare."

"He's gonna be okay," Techno said softly.

"I still can't believe it all," Wilbur admitted. "Why would someone try to...?"

Tommy and Techno remained quiet, and the question went unanswered. Really, Tommy had no idea why Schlatt would want Phil dead; but Tubbo had said he might, and that was all he needed to go after the man. They'd figure out the 'why' later.

"Do you think this is part of it all?" Wilbur asked nobody in particular, gaze still fixed on Phil. "The violence, the incidents with Ranboo and Fundy?"

"There's cases of people missing, too," Techno added. "Civilians, vigilantes. Not just enhanced, either."

Tommy bit his cheek, staying decidedly silent. *I'll tell them. As soon as we bring Schlatt to justice.*

"Fuck," Wilbur muttered under his breath. "I should get patrolling again. I can't hang around while the city's like this."

"We'll figure it out," Techno said.

Wilbur shook his head, rising from his chair. "I don't even know where to start."

I do, Tommy thought bitterly. *I just need Tubbo.*

Wilbur gave Tommy's shoulder a squeeze as he moved to step out of the room. "I'll be back later tonight. Stay safe."

Tommy nodded. It wasn't like he had anywhere else to go; he was basically Rapunzel, locked in the tower. Even if he wasn't actually locked in.

"Mind yourself, Wilbur," Techno added, and they watched the hero leave.

Tommy took over where Wilbur had been holding Phil's hand, nausea turning in his stomach. Primes, he wanted Phil to get better, but the complications that brought for his own identity were terrifying. He knew he had to confess soon; he could only pray there was enough else going on that he wouldn't be hated for it.

"Theseus is still missing," Techno spoke up, and Tommy's heart nearly beat out of his chest. "Do you think he's okay?"

Tommy couldn't bring himself to meet the hero's gaze, mouth opening and closing uselessly as his brain short-circuited on words.

"Um... I'm sure he's just... taking precautions. Playing it safe," he stammered after a moment. He swallowed. "He took a pretty big hit last he was out, right?"

"I'm worried about him," Techno admitted, and Tommy could feel his gaze burning into his skull.

"He's probably okay," he said quietly.

Techno sounded hesitant. "I wish I could tell him... that we're here for him. All of us. That he doesn't need to do this on his own."

Tommy swallowed heavily. "I think he knows that," he mumbled, praying the shake in his voice wasn't noticeable. "He'll come to you when he's ready."

Techno opened his mouth to reply, but was cut off by the tone of his phone ringing. He glanced at the screen, face falling.

"Another meeting?" Tommy guessed, struggling to compose himself again.

Techno nodded, pushing up his glasses to pinch the bridge of his nose. "Neverending," he grumbled, and rose slowly from his chair to answer the phone. "Yes, I'm on the way."

Tommy watched him, and then blinked as he felt the buzz of his own phone in his pocket.

"Three hours—?" Techno was saying, frustration obvious in his expression. "Okay. Yes. See you soon."

Tommy met his gaze as Techno hung up the phone, and the hybrid shook his head with a sigh.

"I'll be gone for a while, apparently. Hopefully back for dinner," he muttered. "Will you be here?"

"I'll be somewhere," Tommy replied with a shrug. "Might catch up with Ranboo."

"He's in training until eight, I think," Techno said.

"Oh."

"I have to go," Techno murmured, and gingerly ran a hand through Tommy's hair. "You'll be on your own for a bit."

"Not the first time," Tommy assured him. "I'll try make dinner for when everyone gets back."

"Don't burn it," Techno warned, light amusement glimmering in his eyes.

Tommy scoffed. "I would never."

Techno smiled at him, and left the room. Tommy watched the doorway for a while even after Techno had disappeared through it, something uneasy bubbling beneath his skin. He needed to clear up the whole Theseus situation with Techno soon.

His phone vibrated again, and he checked it this time. His heart skipped a beat.

Big T: i have the blueprints

[Big T attached a location in chat.]

Big T: im ready

Tommy took a shaky inhale, staring at the screen of his phone as he read the texts several times over. Tubbo was ready. Technically, he was ready too — he was alone for another few

hours at least — but his heart was pounding at the thought of actually doing this. It was illegal in all sorts of ways, and who knew what would happen if he got caught, but....

Looking at Phil's still body, a grim determination settled deep in his chest, and he steeled himself. He had to do this. He owed it to Phil.

Bigger T: are u ready right now?

[Big T is typing...]

Big T: yes

Big T: ill wait outside for u, theres camras so dont get too close

Tommy swallowed heavily, rising from his chair as he pocketed his phone. So they were doing this. He was really doing this.

"I'll be back soon," he murmured to Phil, giving the man's hand one last squeeze. "I won't let Schlatt get away with this. I promise."

His backpack on SBI's floor had been prepared for the mission ever since he had finished making the bug; it had his suit in it, as well as two other comms he had figured would be useful for him and Tubbo to communicate while he was in the vents. He shivered at the thought.

Bag slung over his shoulders, he made his way down to reception, tensing at the sight of the empty desk Hannah had once sat behind. Security was guarding the door, though they were content enough in letting him leave once he flashed his badge at them; they probably figured a kid couldn't cause any trouble. That was good. He hadn't exactly planned for an excuse to leave if they refused to let him. He felt a little less like Rapunzel now.

He set off at a brisk walk down the street in the direction of Schlatt's company building; it was in the second district, technically, but not too far from first. The wealthy districts were all pretty small, anyway.

It didn't take long to find an alleyway out of the way of the well-lit streets of first; the sun hadn't quite set yet, but the roads were still glowing under the warmth of bright street lamps already turned on. Tommy threw on his suit over the t-shirt and shorts he was wearing, purposefully ignoring how his skin crawled where it came in contact with the material and how the mask felt suffocating. He couldn't afford to linger on the past now; he had bigger issues at hand. He tucked one of the spare comms into his ear under the mask, and pocketed the other and the bug. He had left his phone at the tower; on the off chance Wilbur or Techno or Ranboo checked his location, he couldn't risk them raising the alarm if they knew he had left.

He pinged the location Tubbo had sent him on his suit, and boosted himself up to the rooftops of the classy first buildings, following the map built into the screen on his thigh. He would be lying if he said his powers weren't buzzing with delight in being let flow again. Focusing on his magic chased away the lingering fear in his gut; he nearly felt free again.

Tubbo was standing on the footpath a block away from the building; he stood out like a sore thumb, nervously shuffling from one foot to the other as he checked his phone over and over. Tommy landed in front of him, and the boy jumped out of his skin with a yelp.

"Sorry," Tommy laughed, pulling up his mask so Tubbo could see his face. "Didn't mean to scare you."

Tubbo recovered quickly enough, putting away his phone before acknowledging Tommy's presence with wide eyes. "Primes, you didn't say you had a hero suit!"

Tommy shrugged, ignoring how his skin prickled at the reminder. "Yeah, it's pretty cool."

"So cool," Tubbo enthused, eyeing the red magic still circling Tommy's limbs. "And your enhancement!"

Tommy smiled, letting his magic twirl around his fingers before recalling it completely and pulling down his mask. This wasn't a fun show he was putting on, he reminded himself. He was here for business. "You have the blueprints?"

"Oh! Yes," Tubbo replied, fishing a hastily folded piece of paper from his pocket and waving it. "I have the blueprints. They show cameras, too, not just vents, so I can help you avoid those."

"Great," Tommy said, heart beating faster once again. He handed Tubbo the other spare comm. "This way you can guide me. Press it to turn it on, it should be paired with mine already."

"So cool," Tubbo breathed, putting the comm into his ear. It clicked as he pressed it, and Tommy did the same; a quiet static sounded before they beeped to confirm the connection. "Where'd you get these?" His voice echoed slightly through the comm.

"Don't worry about it," Tommy said. Nausea was rolling in his stomach. "Let's just do this. Where do I get in?"

"Around the back of the building, the vents connect to the outside. There's one camera; if you can turn it off and get the grate off the vents, you're in."

"Okay," Tommy said. He nodded. "Wish me luck."

"You've got this, Theseus," Tubbo said genuinely, and Tommy nearly believed it.

He jogged his way around to the back of the building, doing his best to stick to the shadows and out of the glow of street lamps. A tall chain link fence surrounded the property, floodlights beaming down into the ground area, but it didn't take much effort with the aid of his magic to hop the fence.

"The camera's on a lamppost to the right of the vent entrance," Tubbo's voice buzzed into his ear. *"Do you see it?"*

Tommy squinted, spotting the dark, gaping hole in the wall ahead of him as his stomach sank. It was smaller than he'd feared. A ways to the right was a lamppost, and sure enough, tucked beneath the light at the top he could see a boxy little object with a blinking red light.

He crept around until he was confident his magic wouldn't be caught on film, and then hurled a blast of it at the camera. The red light stopped blinking.

"I think it worked," he said to Tubbo, relief flooding through him. That was one of their big 'ifs out of the way.

"Great!"

Tommy darted forward through the light's reach, grateful there was at least no security out back. He hopped up onto a dumpster against the wall; the vents were just up and to the left of him. He reached out with his powers, red magic grasping the grate covering the entrance. It came away easily enough, and he threw it to the ground. "Going in."

"You've got this."

"Yeah," Tommy mumbled, and then gathered his magic into his legs, making a leap for the vent.

With the boost, his hands caught the edge of it, and he hoisted himself up, arms and stomach aching from the effort. It was difficult to manoeuvre himself into the narrow space; he could just about fit lying down, the metal overhead brushing against his back and shoulders. Ignoring how his breath picked up, he began army-crawling further into the darkness. The sooner he got out of here again, the better.

"You in?" Tubbo asked.

"Yeah," Tommy replied, voice strained and echoing in the box-like shape. His shoulders caught against the top when he spoke, and his heart beat faster. "It's — um — a tight fit."

"Take the next left when you can. It should come up pretty soon."

"Okay," Tommy mumbled in response, forcing his shoulders to relax so he could move again. He sincerely hoped nobody in the rooms around him was listening too hard; it was difficult to keep quiet as he shuffled through the tight space. He was desperately ignoring the thought that it was impossible to turn around if he decided to nope out. He was stuck in here now, until he reached his destination.

"Did you take that left yet?" Tubbo's voice was hushed now; he must have gone back inside.

"Yes," Tommy replied, voice trembling. Turning the sharp corners was not at all easier; he'd nearly gotten his leg stuck in the process, and that had shaken him. It felt more cramped than ever as he continued on. "Where now?"

"There's an immediate right turn after, don't miss it."

"Immediate?" Tommy echoed, and couldn't even glance back over his shoulder to check; his head hit the top as soon as he tried. He kicked his right leg against the side where he had just come through, and found a gap by his knee. His heart dropped. "Tubbo, I think I missed it."

"That's okay, just go back."

"Just — go back?!" Tommy parroted, frustrated. His breaths were heavy and loud against the metal surrounding him. "I can't turn around — I—"

"Just crawl backwards," Tubbo prompted him gently. *"You moved forward, you can go back."*

Tommy attempted to do so, immediately panicking as his knee caught in the right turn and got stuck. "I can't—" he choked out, frantically thrashing his lower body until his knee finally dislodged. "I can't — I don't know if I can do this, Tubbo."

"Yes you can, you've got this far already," Tubbo said. "You're doing great."

*I've barely gotten anywhere yet, Tommy thought, breathing only getting more and more shallow as he fought the urge to fight his way out. His magic was pulsing beneath his skin, and Primes, he just wanted to get out of there, but he was stuck and he couldn't go back and he couldn't move and his whole body was shaking now, heart drumming against his ribs. It was like the cinema all over again, but even worse; he swore he could still smell the ash and smoke burned into his mask and that did absolutely *nothing* to help.*

"Tubbo—" he stammered, swallowing back the bile rising in his throat. "I can't do this, I can't — I want to get out—"

"And we'll get you out," Tubbo said. "I'll find another way, you don't have to go back if you can't."

"I think I'm panicking again," Tommy choked out, arms and back and his whole body pressing against the sides of the vent, no space, he couldn't move couldn't breathe wanted out —

"Okay, that's okay," Tubbo said kindly. "Breathe, remember? Like you did before. You're strong, you can do this."

"I can't—"

"With me, then," Tubbo said. "In and out, real slow. Ground yourself on something if you can."

Tommy managed to pull his mask up over his nose, enough to reassure himself that the smell of ash wasn't real. He followed Tubbo's directions as well as he could. The texture of his gloves between his fingers was the only thing he could focus on without wanting to throw up, so he did that; and then, moment by moment, breath by breath, the panic began to retreat.

"Are you okay?" Tubbo asked tentatively. "I'm gonna redirect you back around to the way you came in, it's the fastest way out."

"Don't," Tommy argued, steeling himself. Anxiety was still thrumming beneath his skin, but it was at a manageable level now. "I want to go through with the plan."

"Are you sure? We don't have to—"

"I'm sure," Tommy confirmed. *I made a promise.*

"Okay," Tubbo agreed. "But you can back out at any time. Let me know."

"Yeah," Tommy breathed. "Thanks, by the way. Again."

"Glad I could help," Tubbo replied. Tommy could hear his smile, and it was enough to prompt him to pull on his mask and move again.

He was still in the vents for far longer than he was comfortable with as Tubbo continued to guide him along. The upward parts were the worst, especially given there were twenty-five of them to reach the right floor; most were just steep slopes, but a few were completely vertical, and without the aid of his magic he never would have made it. He kept Phil in the forefront of his thoughts to push back any lingering panic. He thought of all of SBI, really, and Ranboo and Tubbo. He wouldn't let Schlatt hurt any of them anymore. All it took was getting through this. So he would.

Eventually, Tubbo spoke up again, and it was their final communication before Tommy reached the office.

"I'm gonna go distract Dad now, so I won't be able to talk," Tubbo said, nerves creeping into his own voice. *"I don't know how much time I'll be able to get you. Be quick."*

"I will," Tommy promised. "I'll need you to get back through all the vents, so don't lose that comm."

"I won't," Tubbo agreed. "Listen. Keep going straight on, and take the next right; it's not for a while. That will drop you straight into his office. There's one camera in the near right corner when you enter."

"Got it," Tommy said. "Talk to you soon?"

"Good luck."

"You too," Tommy breathed, and his comm beeped again as Tubbo disconnected. His heart picked up its pace again in anticipation of finally getting out. This was the most important part.

He reached his destination in a few minutes, and used the extra strength his powers granted him to remove the grate covering this end. He pulled it back into the vent as subtly as he could manage, before poking his head out to spot the camera. Sure enough, it was hanging from the ceiling, red light blinking in the near right corner. With a blast of his magic, it went offline.

Schlatt wasn't in there, so whatever Tubbo had done to distract him had worked. Tommy dropped down into the room; it was a grand space, much larger than any of SBI's, with much more ornate furnishing. Dark oak bookshelves lined two of the walls, while the others were occupied by the gold-framed doorway and floor-to-ceiling windows. The city outside was glowing against the darkening sky. It was a beautiful view, he had to admit.

He made a brief scan of the office, looking for somewhere appropriate to hide a bug, and eventually decided on the desk. It was likely where Schlatt was sitting and doing all his talking, and it was so grand and intricately carved that there was surely somewhere he could shove the adjusted comm.

He crouched under the desk, feeling around with his gloves until he found a tiny crevice behind one of the drawers; it was perfect. Grinning under his mask, he retrieved the bug from his pocket and pressed it before tucking it into its new home. His own comm beeped in his ear; it was connected.

Done. I did it.

Tommy stepped back out from under the desk, dusting himself off. He could hear the slight static of the bug's mic in his ear confirming that it was active; his own soft footsteps echoed through it. *It's working.*

He nearly jumped out of his skin as Tubbo's comm came online again, harsh buzzing grinding against his eardrum as the boy's voice came through.

It was panicked.

"Theseus! Theseus, get out of there!"

"What?" Tommy blurted, heart dropping. He heard pounding footsteps growing closer from the hall. "Oh, shit."

He hadn't even made it around the desk when the door was flung open and Schlatt shoved into the room, face red and angry.

"What the fuck are you doing in my office?!" he roared, immediately making a grab for Tommy.

"Dad, stop!" Tubbo was screaming, pulling desperately at his father's arm.

Tommy panicked, whirling around to face the window — he was cornered, there was no other way out — and slammed his palms against the glass, magic pulsing. It shattered

instantly. He moved to step out, and was immediately reminded that they were on the twenty-fifth floor.

But you're out of options—

"Where the fuck do you think you're going?!"

"Tommy!"

The gunshot was deafening. It rattled Tommy down to his bones, head reeling and ears ringing from the assault; it was so deafening he didn't feel it at first, senses overwhelmed as his mind struggled to catch up with what was happening.

Tubbo was screaming. Schlatt was coming closer; Schlatt had a gun. *Oh. That's not good.*

He turned and leapt from the window without another moment wasted, a second gunshot splitting the air after him. The sound hit like an explosion in his brain; his head was spinning, pounding, and he was falling, falling, falling, the wind whipping his face through the mask and ground rising closer and closer.

You always did wonder if you could fly with your powers.

He managed to regain enough sense in time to catch himself, whirling red magic surrounding his body and slowing his descent just before he crashed into the ground below. It was just as his feet hit the footpath did he feel it; the burning in his torso, the tearing in his core, the way the front of his suit was wet and heavy. He pressed a hand to his stomach, uncomprehending; his black glove came away dripping red.

Bleeding. He was bleeding.

He'd been shot.

Tommy's heart skipped a beat, already going ninety in his chest. Okay. This was fine. He would be fine. It didn't even hurt, really. Was he in shock? He was probably in shock. His head was reeling.

He did his best to get off the streets. It was still early enough in the day that a few people were out and about, and they would surely cause a fuss if they found him bleeding on the ground. Or Schlatt would find him; he had probably sent a search party out already. What would he do with him? Kill him? Kidnap him?

He wound up stumbling into the nearest alleyway he could find, narrowly avoiding crashing into the walls of the buildings on either side. He brushed a hand against his torso again; there was even more blood than before.

Okay. You just have to put pressure on it, right? Like in the movies.

His knees buckled abruptly and he fell against the side of a dumpster, the impact sending a ripple of searing agony through his stomach. His head reeled and he clenched his teeth so hard he feared they might shatter in his skull; the screeching from his comm was doing nothing to help anything, so he switched it off. Weakly he managed to tug his mask up over his mouth, gasping for breath.

It burned. He wanted it to stop.

The stain on the front of his suit was still spreading rapidly, soaking around into his back and pooling on the ground beneath him. A small rip in the material betrayed where the bullet had entered; he wasn't sure it had exited. That was probably a bad thing. Limply, he placed a hand over the wound; his arms had never felt so weak, but he had to stop the bleeding. He didn't know what else to do.

Come on Tommy. You can do this. Three, two, one....

Taking a shuddering inhale, he pressed down. And *screamed*.

His vision whited out as an excruciating agony lit up his stomach, leaving him gasping for breath. His entire body was shaking now, contorted on the ground in attempt to escape the pain; *fuck*, maybe he couldn't do this.

A whimper escaped him as the world around him swam. He couldn't even remember what had happened, where he was, *fuck*, he just wanted to go *home*. He didn't want to die in a grimy alleyway, away from his friends. His family. He didn't want to die.

He needed help.

Winching at the motion, he managed to find the emergency button on the screen on his leg. He took a breath. He pressed it.

It was frustrating, that help wasn't there straight away — but he couldn't press the button again, so he assumed the message had gone out. Now all he could do was wait, and hope he didn't die in the meantime. A full-body shudder only served to aggravate his injury, and his breath caught in his throat as tears slid down his face. It hurt, everything hurt, and his suit was wet and sticky and warm and he was so *tired*.

He didn't know how long he had been waiting when he finally noticed the sound of footsteps approaching; he felt floaty and far away, with just enough awareness to keep his hand against his torso, even if the pressure he was applying was slim to none. He couldn't bring himself to do more; it hurt too much, and his arms lacked the strength anyway.

"Theseus?"

It was Wilbur.

"Theseus!" the hero called again, footsteps sounding closer and closer. At last, he rounded the corner, eyes widening as he spotted Tommy curled up on the ground. "Oh *shit*."

Something horrid twisted in Tommy's gut upon seeing the man. He knew, logically, that he was probably closest, having been patrolling while Techno was stuck in meetings in the tower; but it didn't help his panic in the slightest that the vigilante hunter was the one responding to his emergency. That it was Wilbur. The one person he couldn't let know the truth. The one person he still had to tell.

He wasn't sure whether it was for the worse or the better that Wilbur didn't wear a mask with his hero suit; he could see every minute change in his face, every flicker of thought that crossed his mind, even through the blurry haze his vision had been reduced to. Wilbur was conflicted, but there was a quiet determination behind his eyes as he crouched down beside Tommy.

"I found him, Techno," Wilbur said, apparently speaking to someone else even as his gaze was trained on Tommy. "You've been shot." Oh. That was probably directed at him.

Tommy nodded, the movement dizzying. The thought sent cold panic coursing through his system. *I've been shot. Holy shit.*

"This is gonna hurt, okay? I need to stop the bleeding."

Fear shot up Tommy's spine at the thought, but he didn't get the chance to object; Wilbur didn't hesitate in putting pressure on the wound, and another scream ripped itself from Tommy's throat, fiery pain searing through every nerve in his body. His mind reeled at the sensation, and when it returned to the dingy alleyway with Wilbur at his side, he was left disoriented and gasping for breath.

"I know, I'm sorry," Wilbur murmured, though kept the relentless pressure on Tommy's torso. He examined the vitals displayed on the screen of his suit, expression grave. "He's lost a lot of blood, Techno.... Yeah. Heart rate is one hundred and twenty-six beats per minute...."

Tommy was struggling to keep his focus, the rest of Wilbur's report fading into background noise as the world spun violently. He felt delirious; everything felt too light and too heavy all at once, the pain radiating from his stomach unbearable but his limbs too weak to do anything about it. He took another gasping inhale, tears soaking into the fabric of his mask. He wanted to go home, and he couldn't even say that much to Wilbur — because he was still hiding, still a *liar*.

"It's okay, stay with me, Theseus," Wilbur uttered softly. "Tech, you need to fucking hurry—"

He was dying, he realised vaguely, noting the panic barely concealed in Wilbur's voice. Wilbur wouldn't worry this much over a vigilante if it wasn't serious. He knew what a bullet to the stomach meant. He was dying.

He was *dying*.

A sob shook his shoulders at the realisation, shooting a jolt of pain through his stomach. He didn't want to die; he hadn't told Ranboo where he was going that evening, hadn't said goodbye to him or Techno or Phil, hadn't even proved Schlatt guilty after all his effort to bug his office. Hadn't told SBI the truth.

He was going to die, and none of them would ever know what happened to Tommy. He was going to die, buried with all his lies and deceit.

Unless.... Maybe he didn't have to.

He shut his eyes against the pounding in his head, not sure if the world was spinning or if he was. He refused to go yet. *Not like this*. His whole body trembled with the weight of his decision, and another sob ripped itself from his throat. Hands shaking, he gathered all the strength he had left to make a grab for his mask, struggling to remove it.

"Hey, hey, it's okay, you don't have to do that—"

"*Wil*," Tommy sobbed, desperation driving him past caring any longer.

Wilbur froze.

Tommy watched the exact moment it clicked, heart wrenching in his chest. His voice was a dead giveaway, just as he'd known it would be all long.

"No," Wilbur breathed, horror twisting his expression into one filled with icy fear. "No, no, no—"

"I'm sorry," Tommy cried. "Wil, I'm sorry, I'm so sorry—"

"No, please, no," Wilbur begged, voice barely above a whisper. "Not Tommy, please—"

Tommy finally managed to pull off his mask, energy draining by the second. He didn't miss the harsh flinch Wilbur gave at seeing his face, expression screwing up in disbelief and shock.

"I'm so sorry," Tommy repeated, voice cracking. *I'm sorry for lying, sorry for this. Sorry for everything.*

"Oh fuck — *Tommy*—"

Wilbur was trembling then too, and Tommy felt an ache in his chest that rivalled the burning agony in his torso. He couldn't get enough air into his lungs; everything was spinning and he was simultaneously on fire and miles away from his body.

"It hurts," he whimpered.

"I know, I know, just stay with me, please," Wilbur cried, resuming the heavy pressure he had put on Tommy's wound. "Stay with me, Tommy—"

Tommy couldn't prevent the whine he let out at the weight on his stomach, screwing his eyes shut. When they blinked open again, the whole world was a blur worse than it had been prior, black spots dancing across his vision.

"Hey, hey, focus on me," Wilbur was pleading, lightly tapping Tommy's cheek with one hand while the other stayed firm on his torso. "Tommy, don't — *please* — you fucking stay awake, Toms—"

"*Wil*," Tommy gasped, but he couldn't quite hear the words coming out of his mouth, nor could he see Wilbur's face clearly anymore. "Wil — I wanna go home."

"We will go home," Wilbur replied, and his voice broke. "We'll be home really soon, Tommy, I promise. And Phil will wake up, and we'll all be okay, just — don't you *fucking* close your eyes!"

Tommy blinked them open again, but he couldn't keep them that way; his eyelids must have been made of lead, impossible to keep from shutting. Everything was fuzzy and distant.... He couldn't even recall why he needed to stay awake in the first place.

"Fuck, *please*, Tommy, don't — don't leave me—"

He couldn't do it — the world was slipping out from under him whether he wanted it to or not, and the energy it took to keep a grasp on his surroundings was far more than he possessed. He couldn't speak another word, darkness lulling him into a relieved, peaceful unconsciousness. With the last of his determination, he summoned the strength to weakly grasp Wilbur's wrist, meeting the man's teary brown eyes one last time and hoping the look conveyed everything he needed to say.

Wilbur's mouth was moving frantically, but the words spoken made no sound in Tommy's ears. The hand tapping against his cheek and brushing through his hair didn't feel like anything at all. The alleyway was getting farther and farther away, out of reach, and the last thing Tommy saw was the crumbled expression of his hero — his brother — before his eyes rolled back into his head.

He let the darkness take him away.

Chapter End Notes

whoops my hand slipped,,,,

that final scene is the entire reason i wrote this fic so i am so pumped to finally have it done and published!!! but the story's not over yet folks ;)

this seems like a reasonable time to promote my socials so come scream at me on our [discord server](#) or [twitter](#) (u can sign up for instant update notifications on discord btw)
<3

Wilbur's Interlude (part one)

Chapter Summary

Wilbur tries to keep it together as everything falls apart.

CW// emetophobia, descriptions of injury/blood

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for [notes](#)

Tommy was Theseus.

Tommy was a *vigilante*.

Fuck, it all made sense, didn't it? Hindsight was twenty-twenty. The pieces of the puzzle fit together perfectly. The kid Phil had hired on the spot for his charm and intelligence; the kid Wilbur hadn't wanted around at first; the kid who had figured out a fix for his suit and needed a safe lift to and from work and who sported so many bruises under his clothes; Tommy was a vigilante. The secret he'd been keeping, the things Ghostbur wasn't telling him; this was it.

He'd thought Theseus couldn't speak.

A million thoughts were running through his mind, too fast to recognise, too *much*. His hands were wet and warm where they were pressed against Tommy's stomach; his fingers were red, palms were red. There was blood. Too much blood. *Tommy's* blood.

Because someone had shot him. Someone had shot Tommy in the stomach, and he was bleeding out in Wilbur's arms.

Primes, he was just *sixteen*.

"*Wilbur!*" Techno snapped, louder than before, and Wilbur remembered he was still on the phone. "*Wilbur, answer me, damn it—*"

"Tech," Wilbur choked out, struggling for air, "Tech, it's *Tommy*."

"*What?*"

"It's Tommy," Wilbur repeated breathlessly. Tommy, who had apologised over and over before blacking out in his arms. "Tommy — he's Theseus, Techno—"

"*Just keep the fucking pressure on him, Wilbur, I'm nearly there.*"

Wilbur hung up without another word. This couldn't be real. He refused to believe any of this was true; but Tommy was unmoving beneath his bloody hands, and his face was pale and the mask to his suit clutched limp in his fist. He was dying, and Wilbur didn't know what to do. He couldn't stand it.

He was dialling another number before he had fully made the decision to, and only realised it was Charlie as the doctor picked up.

"*Wil—?*"

"Charlie — I need — *fuck*, it's Tommy," Wilbur stammered, eyes fixed on Tommy's face. *Please, if there's any fucking god out there, please let him be okay.* "Tommy's been shot — in the stomach, kind of to the right, I don't—"

"*Do you have vitals?*" Charlie asked, quick as a whip. "*Has the bullet exited?*"

The live vitals on the screen of Tommy's suit were the only things keeping Wilbur together right then.

"I'll send them to you," he replied shakily. "And I don't know — I don't wanna move him—"

"Who's bringing him in?"

"Me and Tech," Wilbur said, swallowing bile. "Fuck, Charlie, how am I supposed to — I don't — I can't, not him too—"

"Wilbur, stay calm, keep the pressure on the wound. I have to go prepare a surgery room, but I'll have a team ready when he gets here."

"Yeah," Wilbur breathed. "Okay."

The call dropped as Charlie hung up, and Wilbur's shoulders fell. He'd never felt so useless, frozen with horror and fear. He couldn't look away; there was blood dripping from Tommy's mouth, staining his teeth, soaking into the collar of his suit.

"Come on, Tommy, stay with me," he pleaded through ground teeth. "Don't fucking do this, please — fuck, wake up, be okay, just don't—" His voice broke, and he shut his eyes tight, barely holding it together.

Don't fucking cry now, Wilbur. Tommy still needs you.

He kept the pressure on his stomach, swallowing down the nausea that threatened him as blood bubbled over his fingers. That was all he could do, but it was better than nothing; Techno would arrive soon, and they'd get Tommy to the medbay, and Charlie would be able to treat him and he'd be okay and then....

Then what? He would scream at him? Yell at him for being stupid and reckless and *lying* to him? To them all? Was that why Tommy had hidden it for so long? And for how long? Had he always been Theseus? Fuck, he'd been so blind to it all; so convinced that his Tommy

could do no wrong, that he had to keep him safe, a poor kid with no enhancements making his way through a dangerous world with no support, not even any parents. How many times had he said as much in front of Tommy and the boy didn't so much as flinch? He never remembered him acting any differently... just the countless injuries.

The injuries since day one. They had been what had caught his attention initially; here was this boy on their floor of the tower, loud and bold and unafraid, whose wrist was sprained his second day of work, whose face was bruised not long after, and then his neck, and then his ribs.... Primes, Wilbur had accused Ranboo of abusing him, and Tommy still hadn't given anything up. Why? Why lie to them for so long? He'd been so fucking worried... and for this. A vigilante right under their noses.

But it was *Tommy*.

He remembered well the concern that had pinched at his heart when he'd first spotted the kid's wrist all that time ago, a rainbow of horrible colours a wrist should never be hidden under the sleeve of his shirt. He didn't want an assistant; he didn't care if he was behind on work or if Techno was overloaded, their floor of the tower was *theirs* and the dynamic the three of them had was *theirs* and he didn't want to share that with anyone else. But Tommy was funny, and Tommy was clever, and Tommy was *hurt*. And Wilbur was concerned, yes, a little bit, but curious, too. Nobody got injured that badly from stumbling, despite what Tommy insisted. So what had hurt this kid?

Then was the incident on the train; he had only been calling to thank Tommy for helping Sam with his suit design, but even over the phone it became obvious that he wasn't in the best company. And the thought of someone laying a hand on the boy.... Something ugly had reared in Wilbur's chest, so he offered to drive him to and from the tower in future. It was a long time to be in the car, sure, but it was the right thing to do, right? If the assistant Phil was so fond of was in danger, he should help. He was a hero; he was obliged to.

It became obvious rather quickly that obligation wasn't the only reason he was keeping an eye out for Tommy. Even Techno had admitted he cared for the teen, and Wilbur was having a harder time denying it himself. Tommy brought a spark to the tower he hadn't known the place needed, and even if he still didn't like the idea of letting someone else into their group, he found that if he really had to, Tommy wouldn't be the worst choice. And there was something about him that was just... intriguing. Like the fact that he wouldn't stop getting hurt, and his excuses were as poor as the district he lived in.

Phil and Techno had also expressed their own worries about the injuries, but having only just met Tommy, there wasn't much they could do. Then Phil was invited to a business meeting in the city in the south, and they were able to offer him an escape from whatever was happening at home. They had Puffy keep an eye on him, and Ghostbur, too, had checked in on the boy. Another bruise.

Phil looked into his roommate; he wasn't proud of it, but they were all concerned. He kept the details he shared with Wilbur and Techno to a minimum, just promised that there was no history of mental instability or domestic issues. They had no other roommates, no other family on the records. There was nothing to suggest abuse; except the bruises.

When Wilbur had brought in Ranboo and Tommy had revealed that the boy was his roommate, he'd been so sure he'd cracked the case. Ranboo had been a different person when Wilbur found him. Ghostbur had woken him up with broken memories of a vigilante and a violent outbreak; enough to prompt him to chase down the threat. He had found a hybrid gone feral, lashing out at buildings and passersby and anything that got in his way, eyes blank and wide and teeth bared. He'd been a pain in the ass to keep down, but his demeanor had changed completely as soon as Wilbur was arresting him. He'd thought it was an act, at the time. He'd thought he had finally caught the person hurting Tommy; it all made sense.

And then he saw how protective Tommy was of him — saw how Ranboo comforted Tommy from a nightmare that night — saw how gentle and kind they were with each other. Ranboo cared for Tommy more than any of SBI did; he wasn't hurting him. They were *brothers*. And then it didn't make sense anymore.

A car pulled up to the curb outside the alleyway, and Wilbur pulled off the jacket of his suit, wrapping it around Tommy's middle. He did his best to be gentle as he lifted the boy — *Primes*, he was so limp and still and light — and Techno was already waiting outside the car, opening the back door for them. He paused for the briefest moment to stare, mouth opening wordlessly, and then shut the door once they were inside and got behind the wheel again.

"Drive," Wilbur snapped, keeping a tight hold on Tommy's body as Techno hit the pedal. The boy's head flopped, and Wilbur swallowed bitterly again before managing to prop it against his shoulder. His hands were trembling where he was still putting pressure on the wound.

"Who did this?" Techno asked, voice low.

"I don't know," Wilbur answered tightly. "He didn't say much. Just that...." He paused, exhaling shakily. "That he was sorry."

Techno didn't say anything in response, eyes flicking back and forth between the road and Tommy's body in the rearview mirror.

Theseus. It explained everything. The weakly excused injuries, the nightmares... how there was apparently nobody in his life who would hurt him, how Ranboo was a big softie, how Tommy was always so outspoken and how there weren't any other signs of abuse. Tommy was unafraid of everything. Except, apparently, letting them know his secret.

Primes, how many people knew? The poison in his glass — had it been for him or Phil, really? Tommy had suggested so nervously if maybe *he* was the link between the incidents with Fundy and Ranboo and all the violence; what did he know? What had he been through? Fuck, the cinema collapse in fourteenth, the hospital explosion in fifteenth — that had all been Theseus. There was no way that could have all been Tommy, it couldn't be; surely Wilbur would have noticed, would have known, because Tommy had been through hell and had *lied* the entire time he'd known them and hadn't told a soul. Not until he was dying.

Wilbur had known he was hiding something, but not this. Never this.

Techno was pulling into the Watchtower's garage in no time, probably having broken several laws to get back so fast. He opened the door for Wilbur, who carefully took Tommy's weight into his arms again, legs wobbly as he stepped out of the car. There was a medical team waiting for them, two of the group stepping forward to take Tommy from him as the others wheeled over a gurney.

Wilbur didn't want to let go. He was supposed to be there for Tommy; he was supposed to look after him.

"You'll be okay," he told the unconscious boy as he reluctantly handed him over. "You're gonna make it, you hear me? And we're gonna talk, and it's — it's gonna be okay."

Techno stood at his side as they lifted Tommy onto the gurney, one of the medics producing scissors and cutting through his suit as another photographed the screen of his vitals — fuck, Wilbur had forgotten to send them to Charlie. Tommy was dressed in a t-shirt and shorts under the black material; both were drenched with blood. Too much blood. He looked like a child; he *was* a child. He was just a child, and he was dying, and there was nothing Wilbur could do about it.

Tommy was wheeled off to the elevator without another second's hesitation, the team jogging alongside the trolley as they began working to stabilise him. Wilbur watched them go, weak at the knees; Techno's hand on his shoulder was the only thing keeping him from collapsing. The medics disappeared behind the elevator doors, and Wilbur was left emptier than he'd ever felt in his life. He would take being cursed a million times over before this.

"He'll make it," Techno said, voice wobbling, and Wilbur turned to acknowledge him. Techno's face was wet with quiet tears. "He's strong. Stronger than anyone I know."

Wilbur stared at him wearily, another puzzle piece clicking into place as he registered the words. His stomach clenched. "You knew."

Techno shut his eyes hard at the accusation, the brave front he had put on crumbling. "This is my fault," he murmured. "I should've said something — should've stopped him—"

"You *knew*," Wilbur repeated, head shaking slowly in disbelief as he stared at the hybrid.

"Wilbur—" Techno began, reaching out.

Wilbur shrugged Techno's hand from his shoulder, backing away from his fellow hero as something hot and angry began to rise in his chest.

"Don't touch me," he spat, tensing. "You fucking knew."

"Yes," Techno said, meeting his gaze with a coldness that hadn't been there prior. He wiped away the tears on his cheeks. "I hope we don't need to have this argument right now."

Wilbur ignored him. "How long?" he asked, dangerously quiet.

"After the cinema," Techno answered sharply. "He came to work the next day, and his back was in pieces. I'd suspected it for a while, but that's when I knew."

"That long," Wilbur breathed, promptly shoving down any pitiful emotions that rose in response to the memory of that particular injury. "That long, and you didn't say a word. Did you even talk to him about it?"

"What was I supposed to say?" Techno snapped.

"Anything!" Wilbur snarled, fists clenching. "You knew, and you didn't think to tell Phil? To tell *me*?"

"Clearly he was terrified of anyone knowing!" Techno retorted, face reddening as he rose to face Wilbur's challenge. "I was trying to respect that!"

"Respect lying?!" Wilbur yelled, heart wrenching painfully. "Respect betrayal?!"

"Oh come on, Tommy didn't fucking betray you," Techno snapped. "You made your stance on vigilantes clear from the beginning. How was he supposed to tell you?"

"He was supposed to stop!" Wilbur argued. "After I fucking told him *everything* — and he just kept going this whole time—"

"He was saving people," Techno growled, "because all the big heroes in the tower don't give a shit about the outer districts."

"Are you not one of them?!" Wilbur retorted, pointing aggressively at the man. "Don't try put this on someone else, Technoblade."

"We both were!" Techno shouted, stepping forward. "And we should have known better, but you don't get to act like you gave a shit about fourteenth or anywhere that far out until you knew where Tommy lived. At least I went out there — at least I was trying to support him!"

"Support him?!" Wilbur echoed with a scoff. "Good fucking load of shit that did for him — look where he is now!"

Techno flinched back. "He hadn't been patrolling for weeks, I thought he would stay in the tower."

"You know what, this is your fault," Wilbur seethed, the words dripping from his tongue like a venom. "None of this would have happened if — Primes, *fuck*, if you told someone! If you told *me*!" He stepped right up to Techno again, fury burning through his system like a fire out of control. "You did this."

Techno stared right back at him with wet eyes. "I don't care if you're angry, Wilbur, or if you're looking for someone to blame. But you don't get to take it out on me."

Wilbur took a shaky breath, failing this time to squash down the lump that rose in his throat and made his chin wobble. "We were supposed to look after him," he growled, voice trembling.

"We did," Techno murmured. "You saved him. We got him to the tower. Charlie and the team will look after him now."

"We shouldn't have let this happen in the first place," Wilbur spat out, wrapping his arms around himself. The heat of his anger was rapidly dissipating, and he couldn't stand the vulnerability rising to replace it. "I should've known, should've stayed at the tower, or — or been there sooner—"

"This isn't on either of us," Techno said, though his eyes were welling up again.

"And now he's — and Phil—" Wilbur broke off with a trembling inhale. He was suddenly aware of the blood still coating his hands, and the red stains all over the front of his suit, and his knees gave in as his stomach turned. "Oh Primes — *Tech*—"

The remains of his lunch came rushing up before he could stop it, heaves wracking his body. It was *Tommy's* blood, and he was covered in it, and someone had put a bullet in his brother and he was dying, really dying, and there was nothing he could do. Finally, the heaving subsided, and a sob shook his shoulders.

Techno's arms wrapped around him from behind, and the other man too was trembling as he cried. Primes, how had it come to this? To the point where two of their four were in the medbay, the other two all they had left? Primes, and—

"Ranboo," Wilbur whispered, rubbing at his eyes as he fought off the desire to curl up and keep crying and ignore the rest of the world and everything it had come to. "Fuck, I have to tell Ranboo."

"I can do it," Techno offered quietly.

"No, he's my responsibility," Wilbur argued weakly. "I'll do it."

"You should get cleaned up first," Techno said, and Wilbur gagged again. "Come on, let's at least get off the ground."

Wilbur wiped at his face again, wincing as the blood smeared over his cheeks. He took the arm Techno offered gratefully, each supporting the other as they got to their feet. They had to stay strong. For Tommy. So that when he was okay again, they would.... Primes, what would they do? Ask him to stop? Would he, at this point? If he had been a vigilante for this long, would he choose to continue, even after this? Could Wilbur accept that?

"Come on," Techno murmured, and they finally made it to the elevator and out of the underground parking.

They went straight to floor eighty-seven, Wilbur itching to remove his suit and all the blood soaked into it. He didn't shower; didn't have the time nor the energy. Instead, Techno helped him wash his hands and face and torso at the sink in his bathroom, carefully cleaning around his burn wound, which still had yet to completely heal. Wilbur couldn't scrub hard enough; he swore he could still see the stains on his fingers, feel the warmth on his hands.

But he had more important things to attend to than that.

Techno sent his suit to get cleaned up as Wilbur threw on the first shirt and pants he could find in his room, hurrying back out towards the elevator. Only he didn't make it that far; he was distracted by the dull buzzing of a phone on the table in the living area. Tommy's phone.

Wilbur grabbed it, staring through narrowed eyes at the contact name that was calling. *Big T* — who the fuck was that? Why were they calling him now? Did they have something to do with it?

His fists curled, and he answered the phone.

"Tommy—"

"Who the fuck is this?" Wilbur demanded, gripping the phone so hard he nearly thought it would snap.

"I — is Tommy okay? What's going on?"

The voice was young, panicked. Wilbur didn't back down. "Hey, what's your name?" he snapped.

"*Tubbo*—" the kid stammered, and Wilbur's jaw clenched.

"Schlatt's kid?" he said, hating the tremble in his voice, a mix of anger and fear. "You wanna explain what the fuck is going on?"

Techno had reentered the room, and was watching the conversation warily. Wilbur met his gaze with a glare that could cut glass.

"*I — is he okay? Tommy?*"

"No, he's not fucking okay!" Wilbur shouted, voice breaking. "He has a bullet in his fucking stomach — and I'd love to know who put it there, so if you have anything to say, I would say it now before I come over there and ask you in person."

There was a soft intake of air on the other end of the line. Wilbur nearly faltered; was the kid crying?

"*We were bugging my dad's office,*" Tubbo explained, stumbling over his words. "*We thought — thought he might have poisoned Philza and we wanted to catch him, but Tommy got caught — Dad saw the comm he gave me and freaked out and he — he—*"

"He shot him," Wilbur finished, scarily quiet.

"*I tried to stop him,*" Tubbo insisted, voice wobbling. "*I tried, I swear, I didn't know he would — he would shoot him.*"

"So you knew?"

"*Knew — what?*"

"That Tommy is Theseus," Wilbur growled, struggling to keep his composure. *Don't freak out, he's just a kid.* But Tommy was just a kid too, a kid bleeding out somewhere in this tower, and he needed to go and needed to make sure he was okay but needed to know the whole story too.

"He didn't mean for me to find out," Tubbo stammered. "He had a panic attack in the café when we met up, and I saw his magic — he told me everything."

And Primes, was that a lot to unpack all at once. Not only had Tommy had a panic attack — and just never thought to mention it to any of them — but shit, he really was enhanced, wasn't he? It still wasn't fully registering in his head, that Tommy and Theseus were the same person. Theseus was strong, and his enhancement was unlike anything Wilbur had ever seen, and — and that was Tommy.

"Is he going to be okay?" Tubbo asked hesitantly, as though he feared the answer. Wilbur did too.

"I don't know," he replied honestly, wearily. He swallowed the lump in his throat; he refused to cry again. "I don't know."

Tubbo didn't have much else to say after that, with the exception of apologising more times than Wilbur was comfortable with. (*"I'm so sorry," Tommy had said, blood at his lips and terror in his eyes and a weak, cold hand over Wilbur's. "Wil, I'm so sorry."*) Wilbur promised to keep the boy updated, and hung up the call, putting Tommy's phone into his pocket. Primes, he felt twelve years older than yesterday.

He had his answer now, though. Schlatt had shot Tommy, possibly poisoned him and Phil too, if Tommy was right about his theory, and Primes, Wilbur had never liked that man but now he wanted him fucking dead.

His knuckles were white where his fists were curled tight at his sides, trembling with barely concealed fury. Schlatt had put a bullet into his little brother, and he was going to kill him for it. If his suit hadn't been sent away for cleaning, he would have put it back on right there and then — hell, was that even stopping him? He could leave now, he still had his weapon; he

wouldn't give Schlatt the mercy of an easy, quick death either, no. He'd make him pay, he would—

"Wilbur," Techno said softly, laying a hand on his shoulder and ripping him from his thoughts.

"It was Schlatt," Wilbur told him, barely acknowledging the hybrid. "Schlatt shot him."

Techno was quiet for a moment, and tense; Wilbur knew if his own rage was fiery beneath his skin, it was nothing comparable to Techno's when he was angry. But Techno had better practice keeping a lid on those kinds of emotions. His shoulders remained drawn up, limbs stiff with tension, but his expression softened.

"We can't go after him."

"Why not?!" Wilbur snapped, though he wasn't angry at Techno; no, he knew why they couldn't, and Techno knew too. He was angry at the thought of Schlatt getting away with it all.

"Tommy was bugging his office," Techno said, and met Wilbur's questioning gaze. "I heard a few bits of the call."

"Freaky hybrid hearing," Wilbur muttered.

"He broke into Schlatt's building as a vigilante. That's all kinds of illegal," Techno explained. "Schlatt was defending his property. If you go after him, you'll never see a day outside of prison again."

"I'm gonna kill him," Wilbur whispered. "He can't just get away with this."

"I know," Techno muttered. "And he won't. But we have to wait first."

"Wait," Wilbur scoffed. "For what?"

"Tommy was bugging Schlatt's office," Techno explained; again. "Maybe Schlatt doesn't know that."

Wilbur met his gaze, eyes widening. "So you mean...."

"Maybe the bug's still there."

Chapter End Notes

sorry this one's a bit short but wilbur's pov as a whole is very long so i am splitting it into two <3

Wilbur's Interlude (part two)

Chapter Summary

The inhabitants of the tower are informed of what happened to Tommy, and Wilbur has to confront his own feelings.

CW// descriptions of injury

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for [notes](#)

Wilbur pinched the bridge of his nose, massaging it in slow circles as if the movement would ease the tightness in his face or the pounding in his head. He was standing outside the door to one of the large training rooms on the vigilantes' main floor. Ranboo was on the other side, with Eret and Purpled. He could hear them training; Eret's spoken instructions, the soft huffs of breath from the two kids and the beats of punches on leather.

Kids. Primes, they were so young. They were all so young.

Techno had parted ways with him back on their own floor, deciding to take on the job of informing the other heroes of the tower of what had happened. They were all a team, and everyone knew Tommy; they needed to know. Ranboo especially needed to know. He was Wilbur's responsibility to tell.

Primes, how did you break news like this to a kid? Tommy and Ranboo were brothers in every way but blood; if Wilbur could barely cope with the terror and grief of the situation, he couldn't stand the thought of putting that weight on Ranboo too. But Ranboo *had* to know.

He took a long, steady inhale, and knocked on the door before gently pushing it inwards. Ranboo and Purpled were going hand-to-hand with training dummies at the side of the room, and without the barricade of the door he could hear the soft, robotic calls of points from each hit. Eret spotted him a second before the teens did, and made a motion to the two to continue training as she approached Wilbur.

She must have spotted some of the tension in Wilbur's face, as her own pinched with concern as she stood next to the fellow hero.

"Everything alright, Wilbur? I thought you were patrolling," she murmured, sparing a glance towards the vigilantes.

Wilbur took a wobbly inhale. He didn't have time for beating around the bush. "Tommy's been shot," he said, and Eret's eyes widened impossibly. "He's in the medbay now, Charlie's minding him. I need to take Ranboo."

"Primes — of course," Eret replied, shocked. "Is he okay?"

Wilbur shook his head wearily; in all honesty, he didn't know. It hadn't looked good. Tommy had been bleeding out without medical attention for far longer than he was comfortable with. Bleeding out in his arms. Helpless, just *waiting*.

His skin crawled. He wanted to scrub it again.

Ranboo had been curiously glancing over since the mention of his name, and gladly jogged over as Eret waved him forward. His eagerness waned as he took in the expressions of the two heroes, however.

"Wilbur?" he questioned, turning his eyes on the man. "Is something wrong?"

Wilbur's heart twisted horribly. "You're done for the day," he said, focusing on keeping his voice even. "Come with me."

Ranboo stared, baffled, and glanced back at Eret who simply nodded. The hybrid blinked in confusion, though followed Wilbur as he turned to head back to the elevator.

"Thanks," Wilbur murmured over his shoulder to Eret. He could tell Ranboo was dying to ask more questions, but the teen at least waited until they had left the room.

"What's going on?" Ranboo asked, as soon as the door shut behind them. He was still unwrapping his hands as he spoke. "We finished in like ten minutes anyway, couldn't it wait?"

Wilbur swallowed heavily; he didn't want to deliver the news right there and then. Telling a kid their closest friend was dying was the kind of thing you waited until they were sitting down to say. It was the kind of thing he didn't want to say at all.

"It's an emergency," he decided on saying instead, but that only seemed to make things worse.

"Emergency?" Ranboo echoed, face falling. He froze in his surprise, and then jogged to catch up with Wilbur again, eyebrows furrowed. "What happened? Wilbur?"

The doors to the elevator opened, and Wilbur punched in their destination. Ranboo watched carefully as he did.

"The medbay floor?" he said aloud, glancing at the hero. An urgency entered his voice that hadn't been there prior. "Is it Phil? Is he — he's not...."

"No," Wilbur replied quickly, unable to shake the strain from his voice. "It's not Phil."

"Then who?" Ranboo demanded, and Wilbur winced at the intensity of the kid's stare. "Wilbur! What's going on?"

Wilbur shut his eyes tight, stomach knotting. Primes, he hated breaking this to the teen; but he had to know. "It's Tommy."

Ranboo stared blankly at him, mouth agape in shock, and Wilbur reluctantly met the boy's terrified gaze.

"Tommy?" Ranboo echoed, voice wobbling. "What happened? Is he okay?"

Wilbur took a steadying breath. He couldn't make him wait. "He was shot, Ranboo."

Ranboo made a noise like a wounded animal, shaky hands clasping over his mouth in shock. Wilbur had to look away, heart wrenching painfully, and he pinched the bridge of his nose again, focusing on the cool temperature of his fingers. He had to be strong; had to be the adult.

"No," Ranboo breathed shakily, voice muffled by his hands. "He's — he's okay though, right? What happened? Where was he — where was he shot?"

Wilbur didn't want to reply to any of those questions, because the answers were something neither he nor Ranboo would want to hear. The elevator doors opened again, and he stepped out into a busy hallway of the medbay, trying desperately to calm the turning in his stomach.

"Wilbur!" Ranboo cried, stumbling out after him, and the teen grasped onto his arm for support.

"The stomach," Wilbur choked out. "He was shot in the stomach."

Ranboo let out an agonised, wordless cry, knees buckling, and Wilbur crouched with the hybrid, easing him onto the ground. His own eyes were rapidly tearing up again, tears that had been yearning to spill over ever since Tommy had cried his name and pulled off that mask. Now there was another kid sobbing into his arms, one a little too tall to fit comfortably in the embrace but desperate nonetheless for the support. Wilbur wasn't sure what he could give except for holding the boy, so that's what he did; held Ranboo and held back his own tears and held himself together. For Ranboo. For Tommy.

Wilbur had never been a religious man, but Primes, was he praying to every god he could name that Tommy would be okay. The kid had wormed his way into his heart like no other; he was so much more than an assistant, than a friend. He was....

"He's in surgery," Techno's gruff voice sounded above them, and Wilbur glanced up to meet the hybrid's exhausted gaze as he approached. "He's in good hands, Ranboo. The best."

Ranboo was still trembling like a leaf in Wilbur's arms, but sniffed hard and wiped at his eyes, gathering himself as quickly as he could. "Okay... okay."

Wilbur breathed steadily, collecting himself at the same time. He knew Ranboo was going to have more questions about what had happened, but he wasn't sure how he could answer any of them if Ranboo didn't know about Tommy being Theseus — but why wouldn't he? They were so close, defending each other against anything that threatened them... or their secrets.

He took a breath. "Did you know he was Theseus?"

Techno shot him a warning glance, but Wilbur brushed it off. Ranboo stiffened in his arms, reluctantly pulling away. He studied Wilbur's expression carefully.

"Yeah," he admitted, voice a little hoarse. "I've known since he decided to become a vigilante in the first place."

Of course, Wilbur thought, swallowing bitterly. "How long is that?"

"Since... a few weeks before he started working here," Ranboo answered, avoiding his gaze. "With what happened at Bad's café, he wanted to prevent something like that from happening again. He wanted to help people. That's all he's ever wanted."

Wilbur nodded slowly. "Why didn't he tell me?"

Ranboo bit his cheek uncomfortably. "He wanted to," he said quietly. "But he was scared. I was scared, too — everyone knows your history with vigilantes."

Wilbur winced.

"He trusts you, Wilbur," Ranboo continued. "He hated lying to you. It was driving him crazy. There were times when — Primes, it's probably my fault — when I had to talk him out of it. Because I thought you might hate him if you knew the truth, and he couldn't live with that. And now he's — he's—"

Ranboo choked off with a shaky inhale, and Wilbur reached out to give his shoulder a comforting squeeze, heart aching.

"It's not your fault, Ranboo," Techno said gently.

Ranboo seemingly ignored him. "Are you mad?" he asked quietly, looking up at Wilbur.

Wilbur's words caught in his throat, and he had to glance away for a second, unprepared. Primes, he hadn't had a moment to breathe since finding Tommy in that shitty alleyway; he'd kept himself busy, kept his mind occupied, all so he couldn't break down or fall weak. But he hadn't given himself any time to properly consult his feelings on... any of it, really. Sure, he was shocked, and frustrated, and more terrified than he'd ever been in his life — but angry? Was he?

He'd been as good as a kid himself when XD had cursed him. Young and uncoordinated and too eager to please. He and Techno were still new heroes under Phil's wing, fresh out of training and struggling to work together; which was a polite way of saying they didn't get along at all, constantly arguing and getting in each other's way and insistent on working their own patrols. All he was qualified to do was arrest vigilantes, and it had been drilled into him how important the job was, how their defiance of the law was criminal and they needed to be brought to justice. In hindsight, maybe the heroes were just trying to stroke his ego so he'd really try his best. If that was the case, it worked.

The curse from an outside perspective looked mellow, perhaps. Maybe even more of a blessing; a ghost-like copy of himself that would wake when he slept and sleep when he woke, allowing constant vigilance. But Wilbur knew differently.

He didn't truly sleep anymore; didn't dream, didn't feel rested when he awoke again in the morning. He was forced into unending consciousness, and not one he could control, because Ghostbur had a mind of his own. He was Wilbur, or a part of him, but completely separate; an entity attached to him for eternity, watching his waking hours and taking control of his resting ones. Primes, there had been so many times he'd felt so violated by the ghost's lingering presence in the back of his mind that he wished for nothing more than to tear himself inside out until he was alone again; but the curse would never be lifted.

And he despised XD for it. A rotting, violent hatred that had extended to vigilantes as a whole and only recently relaxed as public attitude towards vigilantes relaxed too. He'd been working on it, on himself; because logically, of course his hatred was misplaced, but it was ingrained into his subconscious too deep to uproot overnight. And apparently this was well enough known to the general public that even a kid he considered his brother couldn't bring himself to come clean about his identity.

So yeah, part of him was angry. Part of him was hot with rage, sick with swirling fury, but not at Tommy. The heat of his anger was directed only at himself. He was the reason Tommy hadn't been honest with them in the first place. He was the one Tommy had been terrified would hate him for the truth. He was the one who should have been there sooner, should have saved him.

He glanced back at Ranboo, recalling the question, and the boy shifted his weight with discomfort. Primes, these poor kids.

"No," he answered softly. "I'm not mad."

Ranboo let out a shaky, relieved exhale, and threw himself into Wilbur's arms again. It nearly caught the hero off guard, but he held the hybrid just as tight as he had earlier, the contact as much of a support to him as it was to Ranboo.

"Is he gonna be okay?" Ranboo whispered, voice strained.

Wilbur exchanged a glance with Techno over Ranboo's shoulder, heart squeezing so hard he thought it might shatter. Maybe it was only a matter of time until it did; they had yet to hear any updates on Tommy's condition, and Wilbur was terrified for what Charlie might say. He knew how dangerous a bullet to the stomach was; they all did. It was why Ranboo had collapsed into his arms, why Techno had raced them back to the tower, why the pit of dread in his gut grew heavier by the second.

But Tommy had to pull through, right? He was strong-willed and stubborn, and Theseus was powerful; maybe his enhancement could help him survive this, somehow — Primes, if anything could help him, Wilbur was begging it to. Tommy had to live, because he didn't know what he would do if he didn't. Just the thought was nearly enough to break him.

"Primes, I hope so," he said, and that was as true a statement as he could offer to Ranboo.

They had gotten off of the floor and were seated in a waiting area opposite the surgery room when three other heroes rounded the corner. Foolish, Eret and Sam; all wearing expressions heavy with concern. Eret had changed out of his suit, evidently having finished Purpled's training session. The sight reminded Wilbur that he hadn't given Ranboo the chance to change, and tiredly he pushed himself to his feet to fetch clothes for the kid, eager for an excuse to avoid any pitiful conversations. The silence with Techno and Ranboo hadn't been comfortable, but it was far preferable to whatever apologies he would have to endure from the others.

"Wilbur," Foolish greeted him lowly as he went to pass the group, and reluctantly he paused, lingering in the hall. "How is he?"

"In surgery," Wilbur replied tersely. "We don't know."

"Still no updates?" Eret said, eyebrows pinching together with worry. "Is Charlie still in there?"

"The whole med team, it seems," Wilbur grumbled. "Listen, I have to step out for a minute —"

"Wil, I'm sorry," Sam interrupted, and Wilbur couldn't fully suppress the way his body flinched back.

"Don't," he snapped, tensing. "I can't...."

And then he saw Sam's face — the regret, the poorly concealed guilt — and it clicked.

"I should have said something," Sam said, shaking his head apologetically. "I thought it was best to leave him off, but—"

"You knew too," Wilbur spat through clenched teeth. Frustration was building rapidly under his skin again like a tidal wave, threatening to spill over the threads of calm he was barely keeping strung together. He spun around, glaring at each of the others in the hall. "Anyone else? Come on, boys, confession time. Am I the only fucking person who didn't know my sixteen-year-old assistant was a vigilante in his free time?"

"Wilbur," Techno said sternly, pushing himself up from his seat. Ranboo was watching warily. "Don't start this again."

"No!" Wilbur snapped, whirling on his teammate and jabbing a finger at him. "You don't get to tell me how to fucking feel. None of you do."

The group of heroes were quiet, carefully avoiding his gaze as he glared daggers at them all. Not a single one of them understood the shit he'd been through because of that fucking vigilante all those years ago, and none of them got to tell him to be calm about it now.

He turned on Sam, steadying breaths just about reeling everything back under control. "How'd you find out, then?"

Sam swallowed heavily. "His sign is good, but for someone who apparently relies on it full-time, it wasn't perfect. Just small mistakes... so I checked the tracker on his suit one night. It was at his apartment."

Wilbur pinched the bridge of his nose hard, inhaling sharply. "Fucking... obviously."

"I disabled it so nobody else would see it," Sam admitted quietly, "and mentioned it to him. He didn't let anything slip, so I figured he knew what he was doing."

"He is *sixteen*," Wilbur spat, voice rising again. "He is sixteen, and out every night fighting, and getting hurt, and working himself half to death and none of you thought to intervene, or check in on him, or let me know? Let *anyone* know?"

Techno and Sam glanced away without a word, and Wilbur shook his head in disbelief, nearly trembling with rage. He turned and left without another word, sure he wouldn't be able to hold his cool any longer if he stayed.

Primes, he wasn't angry at Tommy, but he was angry at just about everything else. The worst he felt about Tommy was upset, maybe. He wasn't sure. He'd been avoiding thinking about it too hard to save himself the headache, but he couldn't completely silence the whispers that clawed at the back of his mind, telling him how Tommy had taken his trust and twisted it into something unrecognisable. *A vigilante*.... How had he kept that from Wilbur for so long? Had he even cared?

He wondered if Ghostbur knew; but on second thought, Primes, of course Ghostbur knew. He'd been hiding things from Wilbur for a long time, giving him headaches so often they had faded into a sensation he was too used to to notice. The blue at Tommy's apartment he hadn't remembered visiting before then, the flashes of images of a vigilante used to get him going after Ranboo, the way Ghostbur had avoided even Techno and Phil the past few weeks.... Of course he'd known.

It seemed everyone had. Everyone except him.

Was he just that stupid? Had Tommy been making extra effort to keep it from him in particular? If that was the case, then he'd known how shitty it was to do all that behind Wilbur's back; so why continue? Why not make an effort to do literally anything else?

He kept thinking back to the conversation they'd had before the gala. With the new knowledge of Tommy's secret identity, there seemed to have been double meanings in every sentence from the kid's mouth; fuck, he'd even mentioned Theseus by name right to his face, and he hadn't so much as flinched. How much was he really hiding from them? There had to be more, with all their cryptic talk of puzzle pieces and Tommy's reassurance that they would figure it all out.

Wilbur phased through the elevator doors before they had the chance to open, moving on autopilot towards his room as his mind stormed. What had he even come up here for? A breather? A break? Somewhere he could sit alone and pretend everything was fine and none of the events of the last few hours had taken place?

Oh. Yeah. Clothes for Ranboo.

He wandered over to his wardrobe, wincing at the bloodstains on the handle from when he had hastily changed just earlier. There weren't many clothes actually hanging up; most of what he owned was strewn across the floor. He hadn't been in a tidying mood recently. He hadn't been in the mood for much at all.

On second thought, given Ranboo's height, Techno's clothes would probably fit the kid better, so he closed his wardrobe and phased through the wall into the next room. The polar opposite to his own, Techno's room was absolutely spotless, to an uncomfortable extent. There wasn't a thing out of place nor a speck of dust on the ground. Even Techno wasn't usually this much of a neat freak, which meant he'd been stress-cleaning the place until it looked like it wasn't lived in. Well, they all had their own ways of coping. And that had all been *before* Tommy got shot. Prime knew Phil's collapse had given them both grey hairs.

He opened Techno's closet with a sigh, grabbing the largest hoodie he could find in three seconds and a pair of sweatpants. They'd both probably be a bit short on Ranboo, with the teen's impressive height, but they'd at least be more comfortable and cleaner than his training gear.

His shoulders slumped at the thought of returning to the medbay. He didn't want to face the crowd again; maybe he could come up with another excuse to escape.

But he didn't want to leave Tommy down there either. Even if he was unconscious in surgery, Wilbur didn't want him to feel alone.

The decision was made for him as his phone rang in his pocket. His heart jumped into sixth gear as he scrambled to grab it, barely registering the name on the screen before picking up.

"Techno?" he questioned, voice tight with urgency.

"Phil's awake," Techno said, and the phone went clattering to the floor.

His heart was pounding as he crouched to quickly retrieve it, muttering a hasty acknowledgement to Techno before hanging up. *Phil was awake.* Primes, that meant he was okay, but he also knew nothing of what was going on at the moment. Would Charlie even let them tell him? But they had to — it was Tommy.

He was all too tempted to phase straight through the floor over and over until he reached the medbay, but knowing he'd probably break an ankle in his haste convinced him to use the elevator instead. He gathered Ranboo's clothes into his arms again, pocketed his phone, and made his way back across the floor as quickly as he could.

What the fuck were they going to tell him? *Hey Phil, sorry you were poisoned — hope you're feeling better! By the way, in the week you were out cold we managed to let our assistant get shot and now he's dying just down the hall from you. Sorry.*

The elevator couldn't travel soon enough, and he ended up phasing out while it was still slowing down to the floor. The other heroes were all crowded outside Phil's room, Ranboo in their midst, and Wilbur shoved the clothes into the boy's hands as he squeezed past them.

Phil was sitting upright in his hospital bed, wings hanging ruffled and unkempt at his sides. Techno was standing next to him, face tight and serious. Wilbur didn't wait to figure out what he'd already told the man; he just flung himself into Phil's arms.

"Oh, Wil," the man breathed, voice hoarse.

He hugged him tight, and tears sprung to Wilbur's eyes instantly. He'd desperately needed some good news; needed someone to hold him the same as he'd held it together for Tommy and Ranboo; needed Phil.

"Phil," he said softly, voice cracking. "I'm so glad you're okay. I was so scared...."

"I know, I'm sorry," Phil murmured, rubbing his back in gentle circles. "Techno's been catching me up. I'm still a little confused, I must say."

Techno handed him a glass of water already half-empty from his bedside table. "You'd be a lot more confused if not for Charlie's enhancement. He works wonders for a quick recovery."

Phil nodded slowly, sipping at the water and clearing his throat. "A week, you said I was out?"

"About that," Techno replied quietly. "Five days. Maybe six."

"Primes," Phil murmured. "I'm so sorry."

"It wasn't your fault," Wilbur insisted, pulling back as his smile fell. "It was Schlatt."

Phil stared at him, eyes wide, and Techno narrowed his eyes.

"We don't know for sure," the piglin hybrid added, meeting Wilbur's gaze pointedly. "We're still figuring that out. But he's a suspect."

Phil's face tightened with concern. "You two have been working on this all on your own? Along with everything else? Where's Tommy?"

A lump of guilt rose in Wilbur's throat, bitter and tight, and he swallowed it heavily. Techno exchanged a glance with him that Phil didn't miss.

"Boys," he said, a stern edge to his tone. "Where's Tommy?"

"Ah, Phil, you're awake."

Wilbur turned, surprised, as Charlie quietly entered the room, shutting the door behind him. His heart skipped a beat at the sight of the man; he was in clean scrubs with a relaxed posture and expression, which could only mean....

"Where is he?" Wilbur demanded, standing so quickly his vision nearly blacked out.

"In the recovery room," Charlie answered with a gentle smile. "He's gonna be just fine."

Wilbur nearly collapsed with relief, a great trembling exhale escaping him as he clutched at his chest. It was as if a colossal weight had been lifted from his shoulders, and in an instant he knew that whatever his feelings towards Tommy or anyone were right now, they didn't matter. Tommy was alive, and he was okay, and the world could turn upside down tomorrow but everything was alright again in that moment and that was all that mattered.

"Can I see him?" he asked, nearly stumbling over the words in his haste.

Charlie nodded. "No more than three at a time, though. I don't want to crowd the room."

Wilbur nodded vigorously, and was about to hurry out the door when he registered Phil speaking again. He sounded worried.

"What's going on? Who's in recovery?"

A biting guilt was rising in his throat again, but Techno met his gaze and softened it with a small nod.

"I'll explain," he said. "Go see him."

Wilbur didn't have to be told twice. With a grateful nod, he was out the door and racing towards the recovery room, heart beating too fast to keep up with.

Ranboo was seated at Tommy's bedside, dressed in the clothes Wilbur had given him, and he looked up as the man entered with a teary smile.

"Charlie said he's gonna be okay," he choked out.

Wilbur nodded, sitting into a chair on the other side of the bed. Tommy already looked miles better than he had the last Wilbur had seen him; there was more colour in his cheeks, and his face and hair were cleaner. In spite of all the machines he was hooked up to, he looked healthy. Like he was going to pull through.

"Yeah," he agreed breathlessly. "He's gonna be just fine."

He tenderly held Tommy's hand in his own, shutting his eyes and thanking every star the boy was okay. Primes, they had plenty to discuss once he woke up, but for now he was alive, and that was more than enough.

"Hey," a voice called, and Sam peeked in through the half-open door. "Can I come in?"

Wilbur nodded wordlessly, and the other stepped into the room, shutting the door behind him. His face was tense, but it softened as he gazed upon Tommy. He lingered where he stood, as if hesitant to approach.

"He's a strong kid," he said.

"Yeah," Wilbur agreed blandly. He wasn't sure if he wanted to entertain anyone else right now. Maybe he shouldn't have let him in.

Sam swallowed, glancing away and then back at Wilbur. "I'm sorry, Wil. For not telling you."

Wilbur's jaw tensed and relaxed. "I get it; why you wouldn't. But I'm still mad."

"That's fair," Sam replied quickly. "I still should have told you. Or someone. Or just... done something. Like you said."

"Yeah," Wilbur agreed. He glanced back at Tommy. "Too late for that, though."

"It is," Sam said. "That's why I'm apologising."

Wilbur sighed, rubbing at his eyes. "It's okay, Sam. I can't say I would've known to do any better."

"I know you love him."

Had Wilbur been drinking something, he might have done a spit-take. As it was, he nearly choked on his own spit. Wasn't it too strong a word? Or was it? He hadn't dared consider it,

didn't want to entertain the thought. Yet the second Sam spoke it into existence, the second the words fully registered... he'd never been more sure of anything. He loved Tommy. He loved him like a little brother, even like his own kid.

"You two are so close," Sam continued, a little hesitantly, "and he trusts you so much, Wilbur. A blind man could see it. I thought he'd want to be the one to tell you. To tell any of you.... So I couldn't. I think he would have gone to you himself soon. You're family."

And in an instant, nothing had ever been more true. They were family. Phil, Techno, Tommy... all four of them, really. It should have been obvious so long ago, really, that at some point they'd become a family under the weak facade of a professional relationship. Wilbur hadn't wanted to be too pushy, or too clingy, had refrained from labels like brothers even in a joking context for fear he'd become too attached. But he was attached regardless. If the whole incident that day had confirmed anything, it was that.

They were family. And vigilante, or criminal, or liar, or whatever his worst thoughts wanted to call Tommy, they were brothers above all else. That was what mattered most.

Chapter End Notes

also a lot of people are wondering about my update schedule!! so here: there isn't one LMAO i'm a very social college student who rarely has a free day, i write when i can, when i feel like it. sometimes i'll update three times a week, sometimes once a month, it all depends on my schedule and motivation which both change constantly. i will let you know if i ever decide to discontinue the fic, but i have no plans of doing so. if an update is taking a long time, please just be patient <3 it will come out eventually!

Recovery Room

Chapter Summary

Tommy finally returns to the world of the waking, and there are some heroes very happy to see him.

CW// mentions of gun violence, descriptions of injury

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for [notes](#)

Tommy woke in a small, square room of stone walls and dusty floors. It was an odd sort of awakening; already he couldn't recall if his awareness had come suddenly or gradually, and he was upright. His feet didn't quite touch the floor, and his surroundings swam in his peripherals.

On second thought, maybe it wasn't his surroundings that were swimming; there was another shape in the room, a figure. It moved more like a person than a monster, but more like a ghost than a person; a shadow. Strangely, he wasn't scared by it.

He was just glad that he wasn't alone.

"Hello," he called out to it, uncertain.

"Hello, Tommy," she replied, and her voice was immediately familiar. It was fond, even. "How I've missed you."

"You know me," Tommy inferred, squinting at the shadow, but she became no easier to see. A figure with no features, there but not. He stared at her, a strange comprehending dawning on him. "I know you."

"Do you?" She sounded like she was smiling.

Tommy frowned. "I know your voice. But I haven't seen you before... though I still can't really see you now. Can you see me?"

"Only when you reach out to me," the shadow replied, "like you are doing now. You've grown so much stronger since the last time."

"But still not strong enough," Tommy noted, casting his gaze away from her ghostly form. She became a little clearer in the corners of his vision.

"Be patient with yourself," she said kindly.

Tommy appreciated the sentiment, though wasn't sure he could follow through with it himself. The shadow was moving around to his side; he watched her, curious.

"Where are we?" she asked inquisitively.

Tommy glanced around, taking in every foggy detail of the room; the barrels stacked in the corner, the shelves of old cleaning products untouched for years, the broom against the wall which had seen better days. There were spots of mold growing in the grooves of the stone brick walls, hard to spot in the dim light of the flickering bulb on the ceiling.

"The orphanage," he said, frowning. "I grew up here. Before foster care, before the apartment in fourteenth."

The shadow moved through his peripherals, examining the cramped space. He could hear the skepticism in her voice. Perhaps it was dry amusement.

"This can't be the whole orphanage," she said.

Tommy glanced at the heavy wooden door built into one wall; it was the only way out of this room with no windows or vents. A crack of light glowed from beneath the wood. He tried the round, iron handle; it was locked. There was no key. There never had been.

"No," he agreed. "It's not."

The shadow was quiet behind him, awaiting further explanation. After a moment, he gave in.

"They used to lock me in here, whenever I had an outburst," he mumbled, drawing shapes through the dust on the door with a finger. "I couldn't control my magic when I got upset as a kid. Nobody could. They didn't want me to hurt anyone, so they would put me in here until I calmed down. Until I learned to hide it completely."

A heaviness settled over the room, the sorrow emanating from the shadow more tactile than the figure herself. Tommy continued before she could say anything.

"I was lucky to have a friend in here," he said. "Ranboo wasn't great with his powers either, but he taught himself to teleport inside. He helped me calm down more than this room ever did."

He turned to face the shadow again, and she blurred in his direct line of vision. He glanced down and away, hoping his peripherals would offer more clarity; instead, his attention was grabbed by the scratches in the stone wall, low to the floor. Letters; initials. $T + R$.

"Do you think there's a reason we're here, specifically?"

Tommy crouched down, tracing the letters with the tip of his finger. "Yeah."

The shadow remained quiet, listening.

"I did something," Tommy said, but trying to recall the details made his head pound. He withdrew his hand from the wall, rubbing at his temples. "I can't... remember—"

"Don't push yourself," the shadow said kindly.

"This isn't right," Tommy said, straightening. He spun around, taking in the room once more; the edges were as blurry as the shadow he had for company. Even the sharpest details were misty; it was like living in a memory. "I'm not actually awake, am I?"

"No," the shadow agreed, hesitant. "Though, I will advise — many confuse unconscious experiences with dreams. You shouldn't."

"I'm missing something," Tommy said, urgency stirring in his gut. "I need to get back."

"And you will," the shadow replied. "You've been so strong, Tommy. Stronger than anyone could have expected of you."

The shadow drew closer, wrapping herself around his shoulders like a cloak. It was oddly comfortable; he brought his hands up to accept the touch, but they passed straight through her.

"But you don't have to do this alone," she added softly. "You are allowed to rest, to take your time. You're allowed to accept help from your friends, and share your burdens."

Tommy lowered his head, letting the words settle in his mind. It was so tempting, to float in this space between sleep and consciousness until he tired of it; but something under his skin was insistent in poking at him. He had to wake up soon, had to leave — and he was sure the shadow knew this. He felt her reluctant acceptance as she realised. It was heavy, but warm.

"I never should have left you," she whispered, voice tight with pain. "I'm sorry."

"It's okay," Tommy said. "You're here, I guess."

"Here isn't enough," she argued softly. "Especially not now. I'm so proud of you, Tommy."

The room was ebbing away, and the shadow with it; Tommy suddenly didn't want her to go. He turned, reaching for the figure, but she slipped through his fingers like smoke.

"I'll see you one day soon," she called out to him, growing smaller and more distant. "I promise."

Tommy opened his mouth to speak, but his words were silent; his hand faded away in front of his eyes, and the room as a whole soon followed.

And then he was waking up again.

This room instantly felt much more real. Though his eyes were dry and tired, a few blinks were enough to clear his vision and make out sharp corners and clean, bare walls. Even in the low glow of the moonlight flooding in the window to his left, he could tell he was a long way from the cleaning closet in the orphanage. He was lying in a bed this time, the sheets stiff and crinkly beneath his fingertips, as though they'd been put through a wash one too many times.

An array of tubes and machines on poles crowded over him, the metal glinting in the low light. Several of them were beeping softly, rhythmically; groggily, he managed to raise a hand to his chest and feel the pads there. A heart monitor, then? A sharp, brief pain shot through the back of his hand as something on it caught in the sheets. With all his energy, he managed to free his limb from the cotton. He had a needle in his hand. It too was hooked up to something, but he couldn't tell what. He was too tired to track the tube efficiently.

Was he in a hospital? What happened?

"Oh, Tommy! You're awake!"

Tommy startled as a soft, excited voice spoke up from his right, and turned to find a pale, translucent figure beaming down at him. There was familiarity in the blue tint of the man's skin, and the mess of his curls, and the sharp corner of his jaw; and then it clicked.

"Ghostbur!" Tommy exclaimed — or rather, tried to. His voice came out in a scratchy, broken warble that made his cheeks flush with embarrassment. He made an attempt to clear his throat, but his mouth was so dry it did nothing but hurt.

"Oh! I'll get water!" Ghostbur said, straightening. He grinned. "Don't go anywhere!"

Tommy couldn't have gotten out of the bed if his life depended on it; he was utterly drained as he watched the ghost disappear through the wall opposite him. Seeing Ghostbur felt significant, somehow, but he couldn't put his finger on the reason why.

His gaze drifted further to his right, and he was surprised to find two other people present in the room; the ghost's source, and his own roommate, leaning on each other as they slept. Tommy's heart warmed to see Ranboo and Wilbur so close, though the feeling didn't last long as he looked a little closer. Ranboo's usually tidy hair was knotted and greasy, and the bags under Wilbur's eyes were the darkest they'd ever been. He'd never seen the two so *tired*.

Something had happened. What exactly it was, he still couldn't remember; that much had carried on from the dream. It was painfully out of reach, just beyond his fingertips, and if he stretched he could brush against it yet the details still eluded him.

Ghostbur returned swiftly, pausing at his bedside to gently pass him a glass of water. He followed Tommy's gaze, smile faltering only for a second.

"I can wake them up, if you'd prefer them," he offered. He didn't quite meet Tommy's gaze as he did.

"No, no, it's okay," Tommy insisted, the words coming much easier after a sip of water. It was difficult to drink lying down, but he didn't particularly want to sit up. Ghostbur wiped a

dribble of water from his chin, smile warm at Tommy's response.

"Okay," he agreed softly, floating higher into the air. He brought himself to settle criss-cross applesauce over the end of Tommy's bed. "How are you feeling?"

"Really tired," Tommy rasped. "What happened?"

Ghostbur's expression pinched minutely. "You don't remember?"

Frustrated at the apparent disappointment from the ghost, Tommy pushed himself a little harder, ignoring the ache in his head. A picture was put together like a jigsaw, not entirely complete, but enough to comprehend what it was depicting.

"I was with Tubbo," he said, frowning. "We were... bugging his dad's office."

Ghostbur nodded to confirm, smile not quite fading, but settling into something grim and reserved. He waited patiently as Tommy continued to rack his brain.

"I was in the vents," Tommy said after a moment, recalling the icy fear that had consumed him when he'd gotten stuck. "To get to Schlatt's office. Tubbo had to distract him, so he turned off his comms. I had the bug...."

The next part pieced together horribly in his mind as he was speaking, and he trailed off, reaching slowly for his torso. There was a fabric tied around it, rough and tight; a thick bandage that wrapped the entire way around his middle.

"I was shot," he whispered, meeting Ghostbur's troubled gaze. "Schlatt, he — he shot me."

Ghostbur wasn't smiling anymore. He twiddled his fingers together anxiously, unable to meet Tommy's gaze for a long moment. "You had us worried for a minute there."

Tommy kept a hand on his bandaged torso as he stared up at the ceiling, not quite believing it all. He'd been *shot*. And... he'd lived, he supposed. How many people could say that?

Okay, probably most of the heroes. This was their line of work, after all.

"Oh Primes," he blurted, suddenly recalling a vital detail. "*Wilbur*—"

Ghostbur had to lay a hand on his chest to keep the boy down; not that it took much effort, when Tommy lacked the strength to fight him. His expression was tight with regret... or guilt, maybe.

"He knows," Tommy said urgently, voice growing hoarse again and heart faltering. "He knows. Holy shit."

"It's not as bad as you think," Ghostbur insisted, forcing some semblance of calm into his own voice.

"He's gonna hate me," Tommy whispered, and had to clear his throat harshly before he could choke on the words. "Fuck, he's gonna hate me."

"Wilbur could never hate you, Tommy," Ghostbur said softly, and a translucent hand brushed against his cheek with the utmost gentleness. "I know because I'm him, and I never hated you for it either."

Oh, that was right; Wilbur might have only just found out Tommy's dangerous hobby, but Ghostbur had discovered the truth ages ago. Had *disappeared* ages ago. In fact, this was the first time Tommy had seen or heard of him since that dreaded night.

"You came back," he croaked. "I didn't think you would."

"I could never leave you forever, Tommy," Ghostbur murmured softly, and Tommy startled at how casually he spoke the words that followed. "I love you. But I had to stay away, because keeping it secret from Wilbur that long was really, really hard. Keeping it secret from *everyone*." He made a noise of light amusement.

Tommy was still staring, stuck on a less funny part of the ghost's explanation.

"But he knows now, so I've got nothing to hide anymore," Ghostbur added happily, oblivious to Tommy's reaction. "This is the first time he's slept since your whole getting-shot thing. So now he'll finally know everything!"

"First — what — how long was I out?" Tommy asked, alarmed.

Ghostbur's eyes widened at his panic. "Oh, only a day! But I thought he was gonna sit there awake all night. Even Ranboo fell asleep after a few hours. It took Wilbur ages to finally give in."

Tommy's heart tugged painfully as he glanced over at the two again. "They must have been so worried."

"Everyone was," Ghostbur informed him cheerfully. "I think Techno wanted to be here too, but somebody had to stay with Phil."

"Phil?" Tommy echoed, eyes widening.

"Oh yes, he woke up while you were out!" Ghostbur explained. "Techno had to explain everything, because he was asking for you. He freaked out quite a bit."

"He's okay?" Tommy demanded, heart pounding. "He's awake?"

Ghostbur nodded happily. "Well, sleeping now, but it *is* the middle of the night."

Tommy accepted that response, slowly relaxing his body again as he sank into the bed. "Did he say anything about me?" he asked, stifling a yawn.

Ghostbur made a face as he thought back. "I'm not sure. I don't think he mentioned it when Wilbur went back to speak with him."

"Oh," Tommy said. He wondered if Phil remembered what had happened that night of the gala; he'd seen Tommy's powers, after all. Not that that was really a problem, anymore, given *everyone* probably knew.

"You should sleep," Ghostbur suggested softly.

At the very mention of it, Tommy's limbs felt heavier. He didn't want to sleep, though; the thought of meeting Wilbur awake face-to-face had his stomach curling anxiously. "I'm okay."

"You've barely slept all night," Ghostbur said, raising an eyebrow. "Kept waking up. This is the first time you *properly* woke up, though. The last few times you'd just spout nonsense and clock out again."

Tommy blinked groggily at the ghost. "What? No I didn't."

"You did," Ghostbur argued with a stupidly fond grin. "I've been watching you."

"You're lying."

"I'm not lying."

"You're gaslighting me, Ghostbur," Tommy accused, though he was struggling to keep his eyes open and focused on the man. "You can't do that. 'M a minor."

Ghostbur hummed in amusement. "Go to sleep, Tommy. I'll talk to you soon."

Tommy reluctantly gave in, eyelids shutting the second he stopped fighting it. "Keep those... bed bugs off of me."

"I will, Tommy," Ghostbur agreed affectionately. "I'll keep you safe."

"Good," Tommy mumbled, and was out like a light.

He didn't dream again that night, but was much better rested when he woke again as a result. He had a feeling it had been more than a few hours since his conversation with Ghostbur; though the room was still dark when he blinked open tired eyes, there was bright daylight behind the cover of the curtains. He lay still for a minute, just breathing and listening to the rhythmic beeping of the heart monitor. It was peaceful. He felt lighter than he had in ages.

It was as he brought a hand up to touch the bandage around his middle did the sound of movement against the sheets alert the others in the room to him, and the peace didn't last long after that.

"Tommy?" a hoarse voice called, and then Tommy was on the receiving end of an armful of Ranboo.

"Hey," Tommy greeted his roommate with a smile, struggling to free his arms from the sheets and return the hug.

"*You*," Ranboo replied, voice wet with anger, "are so fucking stupid. What the hell were you thinking?"

Tommy laughed nervously as he held Ranboo tight; he wasn't sure if the boy's shoulders were shaking with rage or tears. Maybe both. "Um... sorry?"

"Sorry?" Ranboo echoed furiously, but still didn't let him go. "Primes, I can't believe you."

"I missed you too," Tommy joked weakly, and Ranboo choked on a sob, squeezing him all the tighter.

"If you ever do something like that again without telling me, I'll shoot you myself," Ranboo threatened, voice wobbling. His eyes widened then, and he immediately backtracked. "Oh Primes, wait, I'm sorry — too soon—"

Tommy coughed a laugh, and then groaned at the deep ache in his stomach that resulted. In an instant, Ranboo sprung away from him, his eyes watery and wide with panic.

"Was that me? Sorry, Primes, I shouldn't have—"

"It's okay," Tommy cut him off before he could spiral any further, and smiled. "Sorry for scaring you guys."

"I dunno, I wasn't that scared," a much lower, monotonous voice deadpanned, and Tommy's chest swelled with warmth as Techno approached his bedside. The taller hero smiled at him. "Hey, Tommy. Good to have you back with us."

"Holy shit," Tommy breathed, nudging Ranboo with his elbow. "The Blade is in my room, Ranboo. The Blade is talking to me." At the minute flash of panic that crossed Techno's expression, he laughed again, holding his side. "I'm only messing with you."

"Little shit," Techno muttered, though leaned in to ruffle Tommy's hair affectionately. "You are covered in blue, by the way."

Tommy rolled his eyes, though he didn't really mind. If anything, he wore the colour with a pinch of pride; not that he'd ever admit as much. "Yeah, I was talking to Ghostbur last night."

"You woke up?" Ranboo questioned in surprise, still wiping at his face.

Tommy nodded. "I was really confused at first," he admitted with a chuckle, and then frowned. "I had this really weird dream too, actually."

"About what?" Ranboo asked, curious.

Tommy shrugged. "Can't really remember anymore," he replied honestly. "Just know it was weird."

Ranboo stared at him for a moment, wary. "But you do remember... before, right?"

Tommy's smile faltered. "Yeah," he admitted quietly.

"It's okay," Techno interrupted, stepping a little closer. "Don't think about that right now; all you need to focus on is recovering."

"Yeah," Tommy breathed, nodding, and forced the thoughts from his head. "Okay."

Techno smiled softly. "I'm really glad you're back with us. I hope Ghostbur wasn't too much."

Tommy shook his head. "It was nice to see him again. And hey, speaking of Ghostbur, actually, where's—"

"Tommy?!"

Right on cue, the door to the room was flung open with so much force it nearly slammed right through the wall. Wilbur stood frozen in the doorway, tired eyes stretched wide as he took in the scene with a sharp intake of breath.

For a second, cold fear struck Tommy right through his core as he met the hero's gaze. Despite any reassurances he'd been given, the matter of the fact was that he'd been lying to probably the one person he shouldn't have as long as they'd known each other, and now the truth had been spilled from him just as his blood had.

There was no hiding anymore. Just the truth, and whatever came with facing it.

"Hey, Wil," he greeted cautiously, praying the shake in his voice and the tremble in his hands had gone unnoticed.

Wilbur stared at him almost blankly from the doorway, mouth barely agape as his eyes darted over Tommy's form. Fear broiled in Tommy's stomach, thick and heavy; but then all it took was one ginger step forward and a shuddering inhale and Wilbur's resolve shattered.

"Oh, Tommy," he whispered tearfully, and practically ran forward to capture the boy in a hug that spoke a thousand words.

Just like that, every ounce of tension and worry and terror was drained from Tommy in an instant as Wilbur's arms wrapped around him. He held the man in return with as much energy as he could muster, suddenly finding it very difficult to keep his own tears at bay. Months of lying and false trust, every injury and the excuse that corresponded, all of their arguments and the constant anxiety that had plagued Tommy since starting this job... it had all been for naught. And somehow, that was less devastating than the forgiveness this embrace was offering so openly.

"I'm sorry," he whispered, unable to choke down the sob that rose to follow. "I'm so—"

"*Don't*," Wilbur interrupted, his voice wet but intensely sharp. "Don't fucking apologise. I don't want to hear you apologise ever again."

"Sorry," Tommy said instinctively, and then paused. "I mean — um — I'll stop. Right now."

To his relief, Wilbur only laughed weakly in response, and he rubbed the tears from his eyes into the hero's shoulder just before he pulled away. Wilbur, too, was wiping at his eyes as he stepped back, allowing another figure into frame.

"Phil!" Tommy cried, heart swelling at the sight of the man on his feet.

"Tommy," Phil returned happily, sounding a little choked up himself. He had a single crutch under one shoulder, leaning the other against Techno. He still looked frail, and too pale in the face to be entirely healthy, but even seeing him awake was a huge improvement on when Tommy had seen him last. "Primes, I can't leave you alone for a second, can I?"

Tommy smiled sheepishly. "Well, I hadn't planned on all *this*."

Wilbur flinched minutely even at that, but recovered quickly enough to quip at Techno, "how long has he been up? What happened to *sure Wilbur, I'll come get you straight away?*"

"I would have gone to get you had it been another minute," Techno retorted, less amused with Wilbur's horrible impression of his voice than Tommy was. "He's only just up. Should we fetch Charlie?"

"In a minute," Tommy cut in, before anyone else could. He swallowed at the glances that were sent his way. "If that's okay. I just... don't like doctors much."

Ranboo nodded in understanding, even if that wasn't exactly his call to make. "Of course."

"Just a minute, though," Phil warned gently. "Charlie's a good doctor, Tommy. His enhancement makes things go very smoothly."

"Yes, I'd like to get you checked as soon as we can," Techno agreed.

Wilbur ruffled his hair affectionately. "I can't believe Ghostbur got to see you first."

"I'm glad he's back, though," Tommy said. "And he seems pretty well recovered after... that whole thing."

Wilbur rubbed at the bandage under the collar of his shirt subconsciously. "Yeah, I think he's done keeping secrets now. I think we all are."

Tommy swallowed. "Yeah."

"Don't worry about it," Wilbur said, though sounded slightly strained. Tommy wasn't sure if he was imagining that or not. "I... I get it, I guess. And we'll talk about it, but for now just rest. That can all wait."

Tommy managed a small smile. "Thanks, Wil."

Wilbur just gave his hair another ruffle before letting his hand drop. "Don't mention it."

"Speaking of thanks," Phil piped up, shooting Tommy a knowing glance. "I believe I owe you a great debt of gratitude, Tommy."

The others fell quiet for a moment, glancing between the pair, and Tommy swallowed heavily.

"I wasn't sure if you'd remember," he admitted.

"How could I forget?" Phil replied with a smile. "You saved my life."

A few heads had turned at this; Tommy had mentioned to Wilbur — really it had slipped out accidentally — that he'd stopped Phil from drinking the whole glass of poison, but he supposed the others weren't fully in the know about what had happened the night of the gala.

"So you saw," he murmured, glancing away nervously.

Phil nodded with a smile. "You used your magic to take the glass out of my hands," he recounted, and the other occupants of the room startled again. "You risked your secret just to save me."

"I'd risk anything to save you," Tommy insisted, eyebrows knitting together. "That's why...." He trailed off, tensing.

Techno stepped forward, reaching out to him, and Tommy met his gaze, steeling himself.

"I know you said not to think about it, but there's things I need to say," he said quietly. He shut his eyes, stomach turning at the mere thought of recalling the incident that had led to this.

"You don't have to," Wilbur said, but Tommy shook his head.

"I do," he insisted, and swallowed heavily, looking up at them again. "Schlatt poisoned Phil. Poisoned *me*. I know we don't have the proof... but that's why I was there, that night. That's why I broke into his building. I asked Tubbo after the gala if his dad would really try to hurt Phil, because if anyone would be able to tell me, he would. He said he might, and that was enough proof for me." He took a shaky breath, though nodded to assure the others that he wanted to continue. "We came up with a plan to break into his office and get *real* proof — so he won't be able to hurt Phil, or any of you, ever again. And I did it. I bugged it. That's when...." His breath hitched, and he decidedly skipped that detail. "I don't know where the earpiece is — the one that connects to the bug. I don't know if the bug is even still there, but I *have* to try. It can't have been for nothing."

Techno stepped closer again and gave Tommy's shoulder a gentle squeeze, allowing the boy to relax. It was a reassurance no words could replicate; a comfort only Techno specialised in.

"This earpiece," Wilbur spoke up, forehead still creased with tension, "was it on you? When...?"

Tommy nodded. "I think so. I think I turned it off, but I still had it."

"I'll ask Charlie about it. He should still have everything they removed when you went into surgery."

Tommy breathed a sigh of relief, forcing himself to fully relax. They would find it. It wasn't for nothing. It *wasn't*.

"Yes, he should," Phil agreed, and managed weakly to walk over to Tommy's bedside, reaching into his pocket with one hand. "Speaking of, he gave me this earlier. I think you should have it back."

Tommy's heart ached as Phil held out the emerald pendant he'd been wearing under his suit; it was the pleasant, warm ache only a love for his family this intense could bring on — because it *was* love, and somehow the emerald had come to represent that. He loved them as dearly as life itself, so much it hurt; but it was a love worth any pain.

"Thank you," he whispered, and Techno fastened the chain around his neck when his side stretched too much to do it himself. "I'm... really glad I have all you guys."

"We're really glad you're still here," Wilbur replied, eyes shining with unshed tears, and he stepped forward to plant a kiss on Tommy's forehead where Ghostbur once had all that time ago.

Tommy didn't even mind. "We're like brothers, ay?" he said with a wet laugh.

"Don't say that, I will cry."

Chapter End Notes

sorry its been a little while! i took a break for christmas and new years but wanted to get out a chapter before i went back to college <3

Bug Catching

Chapter Summary

Days pass as Tommy continues his recovery in the medbay, and an unexpected visitor brings something they've all been waiting on.

CW// descriptions of injury, gun violence, emotional abuse, aggressive use of profanity

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for [notes](#)

Tommy had been stuck in the medbay for days now, and he was *bored*. It hadn't been so bad in the beginning; he was sore and tired anyway, and didn't really want to do anything other than lay in bed. But after days of doing nothing except sleep, eat mushy food, talk to whatever visitors he had and his only breaks were to be helped to the bathroom? He was reaching the end of his tether.

Even worse, everyone was still treating him as though he were a fragile piece of glass, minding their words and carefully treading around conversations and not letting him do anything himself. He could tell Wilbur was itching to properly talk to him about the whole secret situation, to clear things up for good, but every time Tommy prompted him to get it over with Wilbur insisted he rest more.

It was infuriating. He was desperate to get out of bed and *do* something; he was being kept out of the loop on important matters like Schlatt and the ongoing gala investigation and the bug he had planted himself, of all things. He was sure if he could just prove he was ready to hear it all — because he *was*, why wouldn't he be? — and strong enough to stand on his own legs, they'd have to keep him updated. He was as much a part of this as anyone.

"So when can I start, like, doing stuff again?" he asked Charlie the next time the doctor came in for his regular check-up. "I'm feeling fine again, honest. Like nothing even happened."

Techno, who was seated in a chair pushed against the wall, made a face. "I think you should take it easy."

Tommy wrinkled his nose as Charlie helped him out of his shirt. "I've been taking it easy for ages," he complained, wincing as his side stretched a little too much. "I'm sick of taking it easy."

Charlie hummed thoughtfully. "Normally I would agree with Techno," he began, carefully removing Tommy's bandage as he spoke, "but the speed of your recovery so far has been surprising, even with the help of my enhancement."

A glimmer of hope rose in Tommy's chest. He'd hardly dared think Charlie might actually hear him out. "Wait, really?"

Charlie grinned. "Yes, really. I think your own enhancement might have contributed to the healing process, though we don't know much about how it works. I suspect to some degree you owe your powers your life."

Tommy blinked, letting a weak burst of red magic twirl around the fingers. In truth, he didn't know much about his powers either; they were constantly growing and evolving. He'd never thought healing was something they encompassed, but maybe his snappy recoveries after every injury he'd endured hadn't been coincidence.

Techno and Charlie were watching him quietly, and he let his magic fizzle out, embarrassed. It was still odd that he could just use it in front of them now; the fear of discovery that had lingered over him for so long was no longer a threat.

"I wouldn't discount your own enhancement," Techno spoke up at last, glancing back at Charlie. "Without you, many of us wouldn't be here."

"Of course," Charlie agreed calmly, "but it's also true that Tommy's condition was... worryingly unstable when you brought him in. Without Phil's blood, and, as I expect, his own enhancement—"

"What?" Tommy interrupted, eyes widening. "Phil's blood?"

Charlie blinked, surprised. "I thought I'd mentioned it. You'd lost nearly half the total volume of blood in your body, Tommy. Normally we have blood stores available for all the heroes at the tower, but given you're not a hero, we had to make do with someone else's. We were lucky that Phil's was a close enough match it was safe to give to you — your magic and his aren't the same, but they're similar enough as enhancements go that your body accepted it."

Tommy glanced down at the stitches in his side, lightly grazing over them with a finger. His magic buzzed beneath his skin as he did, and he took his hand away again, frowning. Even with everything out in the open, it seemed there were constantly more questions.

"So Phil saved my life, and I saved his," he mused aloud. "Seems a fair trade."

"You both got very lucky," Charlie said. "But in future, we'll be much better prepared to avoid this kind of thing happening ever again. If you decide to go into the hero business, we'll start building up your own blood store so you don't have to rely on anyone else's."

"Or better yet, don't get shot again," Techno chimed in, aiming for something humorous but just coming across as weary. "Now there's an ideal situation."

Tommy barely heard him, mouth agape as he stared at Charlie. "Go into the hero business? Is that, like, a thing I could do?"

"Not at sixteen," Techno cut in sharply. "No. But there is the vigilante program Phil has been working on all summer, if you really want to."

Tommy bit his cheek, leaning back into his pillows as Charlie began applying a dressing to his wound. In his momentary excitement, he'd nearly forgotten why he hadn't put the suit on in so long in the first place; the nightmares, the flashes of fire and sounds of screams, the remnants of guilt he'd never fully shake from his conscience. He'd given up on being a vigilante, and he'd told Ranboo that... but he had been helping people, too. He'd gotten criminals off the streets, prevented assaults and gang fights, hell, he'd even bugged the office of one of the biggest business names in the country *almost* without getting caught, all on the off chance that he could be helping Phil.

Because that was what he did; what he'd always done. He helped people, and the guilt of abandoning fourteenth had been eating him up almost as much as his failure at the hospital.

It wasn't a decision he was fully ready to make yet, but he owed it to his district to *try*. He owed it to himself.

"I'd need a mentor," he said, which was as much of a yes as he could muster right then and there.

Techno snorted. "Wow, I wonder what poor soul would be up for mentoring you."

Tommy frowned. "I mean, I know Wilbur already has Ranboo and Eret has Purpled—"

"Tommy," Techno cut him off with an amused eye roll, "I literally learned sign language for you. If you need a mentor, I would be more than happy to."

Tommy's heart swelled so much it was almost painful, and he grinned at him. "When do we start?"

"Not for a long while, considering you're grounded," another voice chimed in, and Phil made his way into the room, Ranboo trailing after him. "Sorry, Charlie, I hope you don't mind us."

Charlie waved at him in reassurance. "I'm almost finished up here."

Tommy winced as the doctor began wrapping his side again, the pressure on the wound making it ache. "Grounded?" he echoed, turning his head to face Phil.

"Yes," Phil confirmed, carefully taking a seat next to Techno. Ranboo had to duck under a wing as he settled himself.

Tommy made a face. "You're not my dad, you can't ground me."

Phil raised an eyebrow at him. "Is that so? Then why are you still grounded?"

Tommy folded his arms, ignoring the blossom of warmth in his chest. "Charlie said I was ready to start doing things again! You can't ground me now, that's not fair."

Phil smiled at him. "I'm only messing, mate. Though you certainly won't be taking part in any vigilante training until you're fully recovered."

Tommy shrugged; he couldn't really argue with that. "Fine."

"I'll be sure to give you the all-clear when that's the case," Charlie assured him, securing the bandage and handing him his shirt. "You're going to need to come back for regular check-ups — and don't even think about trying to skip them."

"Wilbur has tried many times and failed," Techno added with a smirk. "Just ask him."

"Where is Wilbur?" Tommy asked on that note, turning to Ranboo. "Weren't you training with him?"

Ranboo nodded. "He got called down to reception for a security check or something, so we finished early. I knew Phil was with Sam, so I went to join them."

"How is Sam getting along with that earpiece?" Charlie asked curiously. "Fixed yet?"

Tommy sat up briskly, ignoring the ache his side gave in complaint. "Fixed?" he echoed, shirt only half on. "It's broken?"

Phil frowned. "Not exactly," he murmured. "It seems when you — er — turned it off, that time, you actually disconnected it from the frequency you had the bug set to, and now it can't pick it up again."

Tommy's good mood fell instantly. "What...?"

"Sam's doing his best to fix it," Phil added hurriedly, trying for a weak smile. "We won't let your effort go to waste, Tommy."

It wasn't much of a reassurance. Tommy pulled his shirt all the way down and sat back into his pillows, frowning. He'd thought at the very least, even if it had nearly cost him his life, he'd put the bug in place and successfully hidden it from Schlatt, that there was some silver lining to the whole situation; but no, because apparently in his panic he hadn't just turned off the only device connected to the bug, but cut the connection completely. That wasn't something that could just be fixed, especially from over a district away — even if a tech genius like Sam was the one working on it.

It couldn't be all for nothing. He wasn't sure he could take it if it was.

But he'd been taking that chance anyway, right? Even if the bug stayed hidden, and the connection stayed open, and he survived getting *shot*, there was still a possibility that Schlatt didn't actually have anything to do with the poisoning. Even if he was fully convinced he did.

Swallowing down the disappointment gathering like a ball in his throat, Tommy pushed himself into a more upright position, kicking off the bedsheets. He looked up at Charlie, forcing a smile.

"Hey, so if I'm gonna need to come back for regular check-ups," he began, "does that imply I'm ready to get out of this bed?"

"And return to your room on SBI's floor, yes," Charlie agreed with a nod. "Though it would be unwise to return to your apartment in fourteenth; I'd prefer to have you somewhere nearby."

Tommy nodded vigorously; he was just delighted to be permitted to leave the medbay.

"So just take it easy, avoid bending or twisting or anything that will aggravate your stitches — Tommy!"

Tommy had eagerly thrown himself from the mattress of his hospital bed, and yelped as his legs folded beneath him, unused to bearing his full weight. He never made it to the floor, however; Techno had jumped from his seat and caught him alongside Charlie. The pair gently hoisted him back up, and he kept a firm grasp around Techno's arm this time.

Charlie sighed. "I said take it easy."

Tommy smiled innocently at him. "Sorry, fellas. Just testing my legs."

"Don't do that again," Techno said wearily, though didn't let go of him.

"Actually, I was thinking—"

"No."

"Okay."

Ranboo shook his head in tired amusement. "Will we head up to our floor?" he suggested. "I've missed having my roommate."

Our floor, Tommy noticed with a smile. He nodded. He had been keen to check in on the bug, but given that apparently wasn't an option, heading back to SBI's floor was probably the best thing to do. Especially given his legs weren't entirely cooperating.

"Alright," Charlie said. "Any fever, dizziness, swelling, if you cough up any blood, if your wound opens, any severe pain, you come straight back to me. Any recurring nightmares, any anxiety or guilt or hypervigilance you can't shake, you come back to me."

Tommy blinked. "That's a lot of things to go back to you for."

"Recovery is rarely easy, and that's okay," Charlie said kindly. "You have a good support system for you here, so don't be afraid to use it. You'll still be back for check-ups anyway, as I mentioned. I'd advise resting as often as you can, with three or four short walks a day to stretch your muscles. Absolutely no heavy lifting."

Tommy nodded vigorously. "Got it, big man."

"And," Charlie added, handing him a bottle of pills, "antibiotics. Take one twice a day. Your powers seem to be staying on top of your physical healing, but it's important we do all we can to avoid a secondary infection."

"And if that happens, I go back to you," Tommy guessed.

Charlie grinned. "Bingo. But don't stress about any of it too much. Between my enhancement and yours, plus the days you've been treated here, you should be fine."

"Thank you, Charlie," Techno said, the sincerity in his usually monotone voice almost surprising.

"Yeah, thanks big man," Tommy added, nodding at the doctor. "I suppose I do owe you my life, and all that."

"It's my job, Tommy," Charlie assured him with a smile. "We're all just glad you're okay."

Tommy smiled, though his thoughts couldn't help but wander to the other half of the operation that had landed him in this position in the first place. He hadn't heard from Tubbo since the incident had occurred; not a text, a call, nothing. He knew they couldn't go rescue him from Schlatt, either, as much as he wanted to. They had to be careful as it was covering up Tommy's tracks and ensuring there were no connections between him and Theseus.

"You ready to go?" Techno asked him, linking their elbows for stability.

"Get me out of here," Tommy pleaded with a laugh. "No offense, doc."

"None taken."

Ranboo helped Phil out of his seat, and the four made their way out of the room, Tommy leaning on Techno for support. It was incredibly refreshing to be leaving the medbay at long last, even if it had barely been a week. He'd nearly forgotten what it was like to breathe air that wasn't heavy with the scent of disinfectant.

"I can't wait to never sleep in a hospital bed again," he said, as they made their way towards the elevator.

"Your bed is all clean and fresh for you," Phil added happily. "I had the sheets washed for when you'd be back."

"You didn't have to do that," Tommy said, though grinned appreciatively.

"Course I did, mate," Phil replied cheerily. "I know your room's still a bit bare, but I thought I could at least make it more comfortable. We can start getting you more decorations once you move in. I was thinking some beanbags for you and Ranboo, a TV—"

Tommy blinked, not sure he'd heard the man correctly. "Move in?" he echoed, heart jumping in his chest. He exchanged a quick glance with Ranboo, who didn't seem as surprised by the notion.

Phil's mouth opened and closed wordlessly for a moment, flustered. "I mean — we wouldn't force you to, of course, but the room is there and we've never really had anything to do with it and I was going to ask you properly eventually but then I sort of got the idea into my head —"

"Breathe, Phil," Techno interrupted, amused.

Phil took a slow breath, sheepish. "Sorry, mate. I didn't mean to spring it on you like that. Obviously you can think about it as long as you want to — or if you already know, if you'd rather stay at your apartment, that's fine. I just thought maybe you'd want to... I don't know —"

"I..." Tommy began, a little uncertain. He was surprised the offer had been in the cards at all; that they'd *want* him to live with them... but maybe such things shouldn't have been surprising anymore. He glanced at Ranboo again, who was smiling contentedly, and supposed that the only thing he missed about their apartment was the person right in front of him. His heart warmed. "I think I'd like that."

A wave of relief washed over Phil, his expression relaxing instantly. "Of course, there's no pressure. If you change your mind at all—"

"HEY!"

The group startled as an angry yell echoed from down the hallway, in the direction of the stairs. Techno stepped warily in front of Tommy, though didn't let go of him; to Tommy's left, Phil had placed himself in front of Ranboo, wings flared.

"STOP!" the voice shouted again, and this time it was closer, more familiar.

"Wilbur?" Ranboo questioned quietly.

"I think so," Phil agreed. Rapid footsteps sounded from around the corner and he tensed.
"Careful, Tech."

Tommy summoned his magic to his hands as Techno widened his stance, heart thumping, but then—

"Tommy!"

"Tubbo?!" he called back, eyes widening. His magic retreated in an instant as he skirted around Techno on still-weak legs.

"Tommy!" Techno warned as the younger squirmed out of his hold.

But sure enough, Tubbo came barrelling around the corner, and any fear in Tommy's mind was replaced instantly by immense relief as they crashed into each other in a desperate hug. Not even the ache in his abdomen could loosen Tommy's hold on the boy as they fell to the floor, grins stretched so wide their cheeks hurt.

Wilbur, who had been hot on Tubbo's heels, came screeching to a halt as he took in the situation.

"You're okay," Tubbo choked out, and Tommy realised with a heavy heart the boy was on the verge of tears. "I thought you were — oh, I'm so sorry, it's all my fault, I should have distracted him better, should have — *Primes*, I never thought he would... that he might...."

"It's okay," Tommy insisted, holding the boy tighter. "*I'm* okay." He paused, and gently pulled back enough to see Tubbo's face. "Are *you* okay?"

Tubbo nodded tearily, wiping at his eyes. "I'm okay," he whispered, and laughed weakly. "I got out, you see? I ran away."

"You ran away?" Tommy echoed, smiling nervously.

"He was so horrible after — after he caught you," Tubbo said quietly. "He was so angry. He took my phone... I haven't been allowed out of my room."

"What?" Phil cut in, eyebrows furrowing. "This whole time?"

Tubbo swallowed nervously, sparing a quick glance at the winged hybrid. "He said I betrayed him," he mumbled reluctantly. "And I... I did, I guess. I wanted to help Tommy...."

"You did the right thing," Tommy assured him.

Tubbo didn't look so certain. "He's my *dad*," he argued weakly. "But he... he shot you, and...." The other heroes were listening intently, and Tubbo curled into himself a little more. "I don't wanna go back," he whispered.

"Of course," Phil sympathised immediately, wings relaxing. "You can stay here as long as you need."

Techno glanced pointedly at the man, and then looked back at Tubbo. "Does Schlatt know you're here?"

Tubbo shook his head. "He doesn't know I've left," he answered quietly. "He probably won't notice for a while."

Tommy's heart pained horribly. "How'd you get out?"

Tubbo managed a small smile. "The vents."

"Primes," Wilbur sighed, scratching at the back of his neck. "You couldn't have explained all of this to me when security caught you trying to sneak in? I nearly tackled you to the ground."

"I was panicking," Tubbo argued, avoiding the hero's gaze. "I just needed to see Tommy. I know I can trust him."

"You can trust me," Wilbur retorted with a pout. "We spoke on the phone."

"You *yelled* at me on the phone."

Phil shot Wilbur a sharp glance, and the curly-haired man made a face.

"Okay, I was really stressed, you can't blame me for that."

Techno stepped forward, offering the pair a hand. "Why don't we get you two off the ground, and back to our floor, and then we can continue this discussion."

Tommy nodded, letting Techno carefully pull him up, but Tubbo seemed to have some reservations.

"Wait," the young hybrid said, fishing for something in his pocket. "I have to give you this first."

Tommy's eyes nearly burst out of his skull as Tubbo opened his hand. "You got the bug!"

"He found my comm, but he never found this," Tubbo replied with a hint of pride. "So I stopped by his office on my way out. He wasn't in there, so I had time to find it. I don't know if he's been in there much at all the last few days."

"But what about the camera?" Tommy asked.

Tubbo shrugged. "It's just me. They'll probably tell Dad at some point, but I don't think I'm a high priority security breach."

Tommy took the bug into his hands, not quite comprehending his luck. "We've gotta get this to Sam."

"You're supposed to be resting," Phil said, narrowing his gaze.

"Charlie said three short walks a day," Tommy corrected his employer. "Here's number one." His knee gave in with the first step he took, but he recovered quickly as Techno kept him standing. "Thank you. *Here's* number one—"

"We can wait," Techno told him gently, holding him back. "You're the priority here. And Tubbo needs a chance to relax, too."

"I'm okay, Technoblade sir," Tubbo chimed in.

"This is important," Tommy added seriously, gripping the bug in his hands. "I nearly died for this thing, I want to hear it *now*."

"There's days' worth of audio recordings saved in that thing," Phil said gently, lines creasing his forehead. "We won't get through it all today."

"But we can start today!" Tommy insisted, frustration rising. "This could be proof Schlatt tried to poison you! What if he has more plans? What if he's going to try again? We'll know

about it, we could stop him!"

"Okay," Wilbur gave in, and Phil turned to stare at him. "Look, Tommy's not gonna relax until he hears some of it. And honestly... we all want to know what kind of stuff is on there. Schlatt tried to kill you. If this thing has proof, I want it as soon as we can get it."

"Me too," Ranboo spoke up, stepping out from the shelter of Phil's wings. "He tried to poison Tommy, too. He can't get away with that."

Phil sighed, pinching the bridge of his nose. "Alright. We'll stop by Sam's — just for a little while — and then we're going back to our floor."

Tommy grinned in triumph, and nodded assurance to Tubbo, who smiled. They'd figure it out. They'd figure everything out.

It was a bit of a squeeze fitting six people and a pair of wings into the elevator, but they made it work. There was a tense air of foreboding hanging over the group as they made their way to the lab, mixed with a sense of finality; whatever was on the bug was going to either confirm or deny everything. Tommy clenched it a little harder in his fist.

Sam was hunched over his work table in the centre of the room, rubbing thoughtfully at his face. He glanced up in surprise when the group entered, face lighting up as he spotted Tommy in their midst.

"Tommy!" he greeted the boy delightedly. "It's so good to see you on your feet again. How're you feeling?"

"Absolutely poggers, Sam," Tommy replied briskly, handing him the little device without delay. "We have the bug, big man. Tubbo was able to get it right from Schlatt's office. Can you start running through the recordings?"

Sam blinked in surprise, though didn't hesitate to get moving. "Right, of course."

The group spread themselves around the table as Sam hooked the bug up to a short cable at the side and began typing rapidly into a keyboard. Tommy once again found himself a little in awe of how technologically advanced everything in the lab was; a projected screen came to life above the table as Sam hit enter, a lengthy progress bar beginning to slowly fill.

"What's it doing?" Tubbo asked, staring with wide eyes at the screen.

"Downloading all of the audio and cutting out any periods of silence longer than one second," Sam replied, glancing at the boy and then doing a double take. "Are you Schlatt's kid? What are you doing here?"

"He's with us now," Tommy cut in, as Tubbo struggled for an explanation. "You can trust him. He's the one who got the bug."

Sam stared at the horned hybrid a little longer, though eventually relaxed, accepting that answer. He turned to Tommy, instead, leaning forward on the table. "The bug... did you use Wilbur's old comm to make it? The broken one?"

Tommy's cheeks flushed. "Yeah," he admitted. He hadn't thought he'd be caught.

"That was clever," Sam said, and Tommy smiled.

They stood in relative silence for another few minutes after that, and Tommy felt a little bad for dragging them all into the lab as he found himself leaning on Techno more and more. The hero didn't have a word of complaint, but Tommy had still been hoping in getting the bug to Sam, there would have been more analysis of its audio and less waiting around doing nothing. The progress bar had barely moved an inch from where it had begun.

Finally, Sam spoke up again, bringing an end to the wait. "I think enough has been processed by now that we can start listening through what's done. Shall we?"

Phil nodded slowly, taking a deep breath. "Might as well."

Sam clicked another few buttons, and the audio screeched to life from a speaker likely built into the table somewhere. Tommy winced at the abrasive sound; clearly the mic on the comm hadn't been adapted perfectly to capturing a wider range of sound. There was silence for just a second, and then a voice.

"What? Oh, shit."

In an instant, Tommy's heart plummeted through every floor of the building.

How could that have slipped his mind? How could he have forgotten? But of course, because that would have been the very first thing the bug had recorded.

It was Tommy's voice.

A heavy thud echoed through the recording; Tommy could envision Schlatt slamming into the office as vividly as he'd seen it the first time. His heart was like a jackhammer against his ribs.

"What the fuck are you doing in my office?!"

"Dad, stop!"

"Turn it off," Tubbo whispered from beside him.

The speakers screeched as the glass shattered from the window.

"Where the fuck do you think you're going?!"

"Tommy!"

"Turn it off!" Tubbo shouted.

The gunshot was so loud the mic couldn't pick it up correctly, only whining sharply after the initial bang. Then there was a second one, and Tubbo's screams were cut off as Sam hastily paused the playback.

Tommy's heart was beating so violently he thought it might burst out of his chest. He stared blankly at the tabletop in front of him, struggling to keep himself in the present. He was safe, he was in the Watchtower, it wasn't real — but it *had* been real, he *had* been shot, and Schlatt was still out there and his stomach was turning relentlessly.

Nobody seemed to be able to find words; beside him, Techno was as still as a statue, tensed to such a degree that he probably felt like one too. Across the table, Wilbur's face had gone whiter than his ghostly counterpart's. Ranboo looked physically ill.

"Tommy?"

Tommy managed to lift his head enough to meet Phil's concerned gaze. Out of all of them, he and Sam were holding it together the best; they were wide-eyed and shaken but keeping a level head.

"I'm fine," he said, but his voice was wavering more than he'd thought it would. "We can keep going, it's — it's important."

"No, we're not going to keep going," Phil said sharply. "Sam and I will listen through the processed audio later. For now, we're all heading back to our floor, and the rest of you can stay there when we eventually come back."

"I want to hear it," Tommy insisted. "Maybe if we just skip ahead a bit—"

"Tommy, none of this is going to be easy to hear," Phil said gently. "You and Tubbo got the recordings. We'll take it from here."

"I—"

"Tommy," Tubbo cut him off softly.

Tommy startled; the boy was trembling all over. He lifted a hand to comfort Tubbo, but found his own limbs were shaking too violently to be of any use. He took a deep, steadying breath. *You're at the Watchtower. You're safe. He's not here.* He clenched his fists, willing the shaking to stop; he *had* to do this.

"I want to hear it," he repeated, more sure of himself. "So I got shot bugging the office. It happened, it's over with, I lived. If anyone wants to leave, that's fine, but I want to stay."

"I don't think that's a good idea," Phil started, but Tommy cut him off, frustrated.

"No, you don't get it," he snapped, and calmed himself again with another deep breath. His heart was still pounding. "I nearly died doing this, Phil. I need to hear it with my own ears."

A hand landed on his shoulder, gripping it enough that it was comforting.

"Then I'm not leaving either," Techno said. He glanced down at Tommy, eyes serious and sincere. "You stay, I stay."

"I'm staying too," Wilbur added, and nodded at Tommy from across the table. His face was still drained of colour, but he had wrestled his expression back into something neutral.

"I..." Tubbo glanced between the group, still trembling lightly. He shot an apologetic glance at Tommy. "I think I'll go. I'm sorry."

"It's okay, big man," Tommy assured him with a weak smile. "I'll keep you updated."

"You shouldn't be on your own," Phil advised, brow furrowing.

"I'll go with him," Ranboo offered, and exchanged a glance with Tommy that conveyed everything he needed to know. Ranboo knew he had support plenty in SBI; it was Tubbo who needed someone to comfort him now. "I don't think I need to hear any more for myself."

Phil nodded reluctantly. "Bring him to our floor, Ranboo. We'll be up in a minute; if you need anyone, Eret or Foolish should be around."

Ranboo nodded, beckoning to Tubbo as the two made their way to the door. Sam waited until they had left before speaking up again.

"We don't have to do this now," he said, eyeing Tommy carefully. "If you want to take a break, that's perfectly fine."

Tommy shook his head; his hands had stopped shaking as severely, and Techno's hand on his shoulder was enough to keep him grounded. "I'm fine. Play it."

Sam exchanged a quick glance with Phil, who nodded. He hit a button, and the audio resumed.

It certainly wasn't easy to listen to, that much was for sure. Schlatt was spitting curses as the echo of the second gunshot slowly faded; Tubbo was sobbing between hysterical shouts.

"You shot him — Dad, you—"

"In my fucking office! Un-fucking-believable — and with my fucking son—"

"Dad, please, I'm sorry—"

"What the fuck was he doing in here, huh? The fuck do you think you're doing, helping him break in?!"

"I didn't — he wasn't — I—"

"Give me that fucking earpiece."

"Please, Dad—"

"I said, give me the fucking earpiece, Tubbo!"

There were several thuds of movement, and Tommy's skin crawled with the discomfort of not knowing what was happening. There was a crackle of feedback as the comm in question was likely crushed, and Tubbo seemed to sob even harder.

"What was he doing in here anyway, huh? Stealing something?"

"I don't know, I'm sorry, please—"

"Bullshit. Can't even trust my own fucking kid — you trying to be rebellious? Is that it? Lash out by betraying your own fucking dad? Primes, you're pathetic."

"I'm sorry, Dad—"

"Get the fuck out of here. Can't even string a fucking sentence together — go to your fucking room, and don't even think about coming out of there. I don't wanna have to look at you."

"Please, I'm sorry—"

"I said get out!"

A second of silence followed; the time on the screen indicated they'd only skipped a half hour. Tommy shifted his weight uncomfortably, not sure how to address everything they'd just heard. The lines in Phil's forehead had never been so defined; there was a weight in his expression Tommy had never seen before.

"Nothing out of place," Schlatt spoke up again, as the audio continued to play. "Checked the whole office. Reckon I caught him before he had the chance to nick anything."

"And you think he was here to steal?"

Techno stiffened beside him; Tommy knew why. That voice was horribly familiar.

"Dream," Sam muttered, face falling.

"The fuck else would he be doing? I didn't realise he and Tubbo were so buddy-buddy. Probably a stupid dare. Primes, kid's a useless piece of shit."

Tommy flinched at that; he didn't understand how Schlatt could speak about his own son like he was referring to dirt on his shoe. He did understand why Tubbo hadn't been keen to stay, however.

Over the speakers, Dream hummed in a manner that didn't seem to quite agree with Schlatt's sentiments. Nevertheless, he didn't address Tommy's motives any further.

"He broke your window."

"No shit. That's how he escaped. I shot him right before he did, though."

There was a beat.

"You shot him?"

"Uh, yeah? I was hardly letting him fuck off without a scratch."

"I said I wanted him alive."

Tommy froze as he registered the words, a chill running from his spine right down to the marrow in his bones. In an instant, the wide-eyed gazes of the heroes in the room had snapped to stare at him, but he couldn't bring himself to meet them. Dream wanted him alive? Dream *wanted* him? And was trying to get him through *Schlatt*?

"You also said the fucker would survive being hit by a train—"

"That wasn't something I wanted you to test out," Dream snapped, irritated. *"If he dies, it's on your head."*

"I don't understand why he's so important to you. The rest of your plan is going fucking swimmingly, need I remind you. Half the Watchtower's working for us now, and I just got rid of the old crow for you."

"Which you were supposed to deal with months ago, need I remind you."

"And I would have, if that asshole hadn't got in the fucking way."

Tommy's heart skipped a beat, and he stared up at Phil with wide eyes. That was it; the confession he'd done all of it for. Schlatt had tried to kill him; had tried to kill him *months ago*, and seemed to be somewhat convinced he'd succeeded. Everything since the gala had come down to this; yet suddenly, in the midst of it all, it seemed so small. Suddenly, their problems seemed to be a lot bigger than they'd thought.

Another second of silence followed; the time had skipped forward just a few seconds.

"The Egg's power grows more by the day," Dream said, voice low, and Tommy's blood ran cold. "We can't afford to wait any longer than the festival to unleash it. I want my list completed by then."

"Oh, come on. Philza's down, I've got the captain and the rest of your fucking team working for us. I tried getting my hands on Ghostbur, and got that fucking speedster fox instead. What, you want me to get the Blade now too? SBI's fallen to pieces, and the rest of the heroes in that shithole aren't worth—"

There was a heavy thud.

"You forget your place, Schlatt. Or need I remind you you're not the one making the decisions here?"

"Fuck off, the festival is in two weeks and you want me to have all the heroes of the world under control by then? I'm doing the best I can—"

"Do better."

"And what have you been fucking doing? Couldn't get two fucking kids under your control but you expect me to do all the dirty work—"

A resounding smack echoed through the speakers, and Tommy flinched.

"I'd choose your words very carefully, Schlatt. I've been generous; I let you keep your life. Don't think I won't take away that privilege if you step out of line."

Schlatt stayed silent this time, and Dream continued.

"We make our move the day of the festival. If you're not working with me, then you'll be eliminated like the rest of them. Now get to fucking work."

Chapter End Notes

if charlie seems massively out of character i dont wanna hear abt it i know absolutely nothing abt him or his dsm5 character i just needed someone to be the doctor lmao

and sorry for slow updates recently!! second semester of college has been mental and im in the process of applying for accommodation, a job, and my provisional licence all at the same time i have not a moment to spare rn :')

Tommy and Theseus

Chapter Summary

With new information on Schlatt and Dream's schemes, the heroes of the tower make plans of their own. And Wilbur and Tommy need to have a talk....

CW// mentions of gun violence, injury mentions

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for [notes](#)

It took several days to work through the entirety of the processed audio from the bug, and none of it was any easier to hear than the first few minutes had been. Nevertheless, Tommy insisted on being there for as much of it as he was allowed. His three to four daily walks permitted by Charlie became his regular trips to Sam's lab; Phil always accompanied him, and Techno and Wilbur were there most of the time.

Bugging Schlatt's office had either been the best or worst move of his life.

The more they learned, the worse the situation revealed itself to be. In the space of a few minutes, they'd gotten a confession from Schlatt for attempts on Phil's life, vague plans for the Heroes Festival in two weeks' time, a connection between Dream and Schlatt and the Egg, and the knowledge that they wanted Tommy for something, and that they wanted him alive. With every next minute they listened to, it only got more complicated.

There was so much going on that they hadn't known about; so much that had been going on for *months*, happening right under their noses. Every new piece of the puzzle only painted a more horrible picture. All Tommy had wanted was proof that Schlatt was behind the poisoned drinks; instead he'd gotten the fall of L'Manberg put on the calendar.

Worst of all, they still had no idea what exactly they were up against.

"The Egg works via mind control," Tommy was explaining to a table of heroes, expression grave. "That was the case for... someone I ran into as a vigilante, and I think it's safe to assume it's the same for the majority of those affected."

This wasn't the first emergency meeting called since they'd listened to the audio files; there had been several held for the heroes of the tower as they discussed their options and kept everyone informed. Tensions were high; with cryptic comments from Schlatt or Dream about having half the tower under their control, there were numerous arguments on who they could trust, and with how much. This was the first meeting Tommy had been allowed to, mostly because he'd been arguing that Tubbo and Ranboo were allowed to join him; also because as neither a hero nor an "official" vigilante, he didn't usually make the cut for emergency meetings. It was Techno who had really made a case for him; as Theseus, he had shared with the hero more information about the Egg than the rest of the tower combined, and so now he was enlightening them all. It was a little intimidating, but with SBI seated close at his sides, he knew he had nothing to fear.

"Fortunately, it seems those under the Egg's control all have red eyes, so we'll be able to tell the difference."

"How can you know this for sure?" Foolish questioned, leaning forward in his chair.

Tommy swallowed heavily, and Techno reached over, giving his shoulder a squeeze.

"Some of you probably remember the hospital incident in fifteenth," he started, voice tightening. Sam glanced away, and Charlie nodded. "I responded to an alert there and met a kid outside the building. He had red eyes and a bomb strapped to his chest." He took a shaky inhale. "We talked for a bit. I tried to convince him to take it off, but it only made things worse. He didn't talk like a kid. That was the first time I heard about the Egg. He wanted me to join them; said the Egg offered limitless power, made all the decisions for you. I refused, so he — when...." He trailed off, chin wobbling, and took another moment to compose himself.

"You're alright, mate," Phil said quietly.

Tommy nodded, breathing steadily. *You can do this.* "When the bomb went off, I did my best to separate it from his body. I guess the pain snapped him out of it or something, because

he... he didn't want to do it anymore. He... his eyes weren't red either. And I've fought other people who weren't themselves with red eyes. It's gotta be mind control."

"I've run into red-eyed individuals numerous times patrolling second," Eret spoke up, folding their arms. "Especially more recently. They're more violent than the usual threats we face."

"I've seen them too," Michael added. "Even before I joined the program."

"This is a city-wide issue," Phil said gravely, clasping his hands together. "There could be hundreds of people infected at present. Do we have any way of even estimating the total number under the Egg's control?"

"I've pulled up all mission reports this summer with the phrase '*red eyes*' mentioned," Sam chimed in, scrolling through a tablet with furrowed brows. "Twelve results total, all from Techno."

Several pairs of eyes turned on the piglin hybrid at once, and Techno straightened in his chair.

"Tommy told me about the red eyes the night of the hospital incident in fifteenth," he explained evenly. "I wasn't sure if he was making false connections in his panic, but I started keeping track. Turns out he was right."

"About how many times would you have patrolled after the hospital?" Sam asked.

Techno shrugged. "Not many between that and the gala. I haven't patrolled since then, when I took over for Phil. Probably ran into someone with red eyes nearly every time."

The table was quiet for a moment as everyone processed that information.

"That's... a lot of people," Tubbo murmured.

"How do they even have that wide of a reach?" Wilbur asked, frowning. "How can they keep that many people under control all at once?"

"Maybe it's like a hive mind," Tommy mused, still thinking back on his interactions with the boy outside the hospital. "Maybe they keep each other under control. They share information, anyway."

"Like what?" Charlie inquired.

Tommy's stomach curled. "They all know who I am," he replied quietly. "Mask or no mask."

Techno flexed his fingers beside him, and Wilbur shifted his weight uncomfortably. The fact that this egg cult knew Tommy's identity was something that had become clear as they listened to the recordings; somehow, they'd made the connection, and everyone working with — or for — them knew about it.

Then came the uncomfortable fact that they clearly *wanted* him for something, too. They'd been looking for him to join them ever since he'd met Bad at the cinema, and it had become no more clear as to why. Dream's plans for Tommy weren't something he'd shared with Schlatt — or anyone, for that matter.

"What even is *the Egg*?" Connor questioned, raising an eyebrow. "Do we know? Because somehow I don't think it's a breakfast food."

"We don't know, really," Phil replied. "From the way it's been described, it sounds like a power source of some kind. It seems to be what's giving them the means to run this whole operation."

"Is it a device, maybe?" Ranboo suggested quietly, glancing at Sam.

Sam shook his head. "I've never heard of the likes of it. If it's a power store.... Primes, I can't even comprehend how you'd go about making such a thing."

"You think it's a power — what, like enhancement power?" Connor said, skeptical.

"I'm not sure what else it could be," Sam replied. "Widespread mind control... if it's not enhancement based, I'd be seriously impressed."

"And how long has this all been going on for?" Foolish chimed in, brow furrowing. "If they're operating at such a large scale now, this can't be anything new."

"Months, at least," Tommy answered. "My former employer... he lost control and destroyed the building before going missing for weeks. He had red eyes the next I saw him. And vigilantes have been going on about increasing gang violence as long as I've been on the streets."

"It's true," Michael agreed with a nod. "Especially the outer districts. I didn't really pay attention to eye colour, but it's been around since the start of the summer at least."

Wilbur reluctantly spoke up in the moment of silence that followed. "Do you think the Egg is what got Fundy?"

Techno nodded gravely. "You heard Schlatt. They were aiming to get you."

"Fuck," the curly-haired hero muttered, running a hand over his face.

"And it sounds like the Dream Team and Puffy are facing the same," Eret added. "Hannah, too."

"Maybe not Dream," Techno corrected them. "He sounds more like he's running the whole thing than he is a victim. Hell, we can't be sure if any of them are being forced to do this or

not until we get a sure visual of their eyes."

"It doesn't make sense," Charlie murmured. "Dream's always been a little ambitious, sure, but not *evil*. This... this doesn't feel like him."

"Maybe we didn't know him as well as we thought," Phil said soberly.

"But this mind control stuff," Wilbur chimed in again, glancing at Tommy, "it can be lifted? You said — with the kid—"

"Yeah," Tommy replied, heart sinking. "It can. I don't know what did it though. The pain, I think."

There was quiet after that, and Tommy's chest weighed even heavier.

"We couldn't question the kid, could we?" Foolish suggested after a moment. "Where is he now?"

"I believe he's still being treated in hospital," Sam replied gravely, and Tommy bowed his head, staring at his hands. "He was deemed fit for visits a few weeks ago, and Charlie and I visited him. He can't remember anything during the time he would have been under the Egg's control."

"Can't remember..." Tommy mumbled under his breath, gears turning in his mind. He glanced at Ranboo, a slow, suffocating fear chilling his nerves as the realisation pieced itself together.

Wilbur caught his train of thought and nodded seriously. "I've said it before that I thought the incidents with Fundy and Ranboo were connected. You said you thought you were the link."

And I am, Tommy thought glumly. *We know that for sure now.*

"Wait," Ranboo cut in, before Tommy could reply. "You're saying that those enderwalks... that the Egg was trying to mind control me?"

"Do you remember anything? Any details?" Sam asked him.

"No," Ranboo responded warily. "But I never remember much when I enderwalk."

"A happy coincidence, maybe," Wilbur said, in a tone that suggested there was nothing happy about the situation. "I've said this to Tommy, but I think maybe the attempted mind control triggered your enderwalk, which would kind of override a mind control attempt."

"Because I'm not in my right mind when I enderwalk," Ranboo inferred, eyes widening. "So they'd only be controlling that part of me, until I'm back to myself."

"Bingo."

"Plus, there was no camera footage of the incident when Wilbur brought you in," Phil added. "I thought that was maybe because *you* gave off a magical interference, but we know enough about your enhancements now that that's not possible. It means someone else was using magic in the area at the time, powerful enough to interfere with surrounding technology."

Ranboo slumped back in his seat, face paling drastically. "Oh Primes."

"I'm sorry," Tommy murmured, voice tight. The guilt was constricting, like a rope around his neck that only got tighter and tighter the longer the conversation continued.

Several pairs of eyes turned to him, confused.

"What do you mean, sorry?" Purpled questioned, narrowing his eyes from across the table. A few of the others in the room nodded.

"There's something else," Tommy began hesitantly, fidgeting restlessly with his hands. "The Egg's wanted me for a while, right? Dream said that. I've been asked to join them twice, and both times I said no. The second time, at the hospital... he said they'd go after the people I... the people I love. If I didn't."

"That's not your fault," Ranboo jumped in immediately. "If you had joined them, who knows what they would have done to you. We could have lost you."

"But now they have Fundy, and they've gone for you at least once," Tommy protested.

"They were planning on having all of us under their control either way," Wilbur added. "Hell, we're still on that list, from what it sounds like."

"But maybe if I had—"

"Don't do that to yourself, mate," Phil said gently. "They've been ten steps ahead this whole time. Things could be much worse if you hadn't done what you did."

"Besides, the past is the past," Purpled piped up again. "I'm a little more worried about the future. Like, what's our move?"

"For the Heroes Festival? We're going to need a plan, that's for sure," Phil replied. "We don't know much about what it is they're planning, but it sounds like the end goal is control of the whole city. Obviously, we can't let that happen."

"How are we supposed to stop it?" Michael challenged. "If they just mind control us all there'll be nothing we can do."

"Is there any way to fight it off?" Foolish asked. "Tubbo, do you know anything about it?"

Tubbo shook his head, frowning. "Dad didn't tell me anything. I had no idea about... *any* of this."

Tommy offered the boy a sympathetic smile, but it didn't seem to do much to raise his spirits. Aside from the little bits and pieces SBI had been telling them beforehand, this was really the first time Tubbo was sitting down in a proper discussion about his father's wrongdoings. It was never going to be easy to hear, but the boy was definitely taking it pretty badly.

"How do we know for sure one of us hasn't fought it off already?" Charlie mused aloud, glancing between the heroes. "Would we know?"

Sam was scrolling through his tablet again, and picked up his head at that question. "Wilbur's mission report from Fundy's incident mentions that Fundy had a serious headache only minutes prior to becoming violent. Do any of you recall experiencing something similar on patrol?"

"I have a headache every day," Connor muttered under his breath, and Michael smiled at him in amusement.

Tommy's stomach was tying itself into knots. "I did."

Wilbur snapped his head around so fast Tommy wasn't sure the hero didn't have whiplash. "What?"

He wasn't the only one staring at Tommy, and the boy shrank back into his seat a little nervously. "It was... a while ago. I can't remember exactly when. Not long after Karl disappeared."

"Karl disappeared?" Purpled asked, eyebrows shooting up behind his fringe. "I liked that guy."

"Probably egged," Connor mumbled.

"That was nearly two months ago," Techno mused, eyebrows furrowing. "I remember you telling me about him. Karl Jacobs."

Tommy nodded. "I was in fifteenth on patrol, because obviously Karl wasn't around to look after it anymore. Got a really bad headache out of nowhere — and I mean *really* bad. I thought my head was gonna explode."

Ranboo was watching him with eyes heavy with worry; he met his roommate's gaze and nodded to assure them both.

"My magic... it acts on its own sometimes. Like it has a mind of its own, or some shit," he explained, because he felt context was necessary. "It just... I dunno how to explain it. Chased it out of my head, and then I was fine."

"So you fought it off with your enhancement?" Eret clarified, raising their eyebrows.

Tommy nodded. "There was something else. A figure. I didn't see their face."

"It was Dream," Techno growled, tensing beside him. "You and Ranboo — you're the two kids Schlatt mentioned. He went after both of you."

"But Dream isn't enhanced," Tubbo said.

"The Egg, this power source — he must be drawing this mind control ability from it," Sam mused. "I'd wager Schlatt is too. There's no way Dream has single-handedly enslaved half the city."

"Let's go back to Tommy's magic fighting off the mind control real quick," Wilbur piped up, silencing the growing discussion. "So it *is* possible. But it was more... instinct, that saved you?"

Tommy met the hero's gaze and nodded. "I didn't mean to do anything. My magic acted on its own."

"And Ranboo's enderwalk beat it off too," Phil murmured. "So maybe certain enhancements can counter it?"

"But clearly not every enhancement," Foolish added. "And not to mention all of those who aren't enhanced at all."

"I think Philza's right," Tubbo said quietly, and the heroes turned to him with interest. "Dad... Schlatt wanted Philza — um, well, dead. Why go through all the effort of poisoning him if he could just put him under mind control?"

"Tubbo's got a point," Ranboo agreed, eyes widening.

"I think he wanted Puffy dead too," Tommy admitted reluctantly. "I know I can't prove it, but there were two cups marked with a *P* the first time. P for poison, or...."

"P for Phil and Puffy," Tubbo finished, keeping his gaze firmly fixed downwards. "He must have feared they couldn't control you."

Phil's forehead creased in his confusion. "But I just have light magic," he said. "And I'm not sure it even qualifies as *magic* compared to an enhancement like Tommy's."

"And they clearly egged Puffy in the end, since she hasn't been in contact," Wilbur said, and then a realisation struck him and he paled drastically. "Primes, unless they actually...."

"She's alive," Tubbo interrupted hastily, and Tommy's shoulders sagged with relief. He wasn't sure his heart could have taken the news of something so devastating. "I saw her every now and again around the building. Probably egged, though."

"So they were able to control her, even with their concerns," Eret murmured. "Begg the question of what really will stop them if they set their mind to something."

"You're all going to be in one place for the festival," Ranboo pointed out, frowning. "That can't mean anything good if that's when they plan on making their move."

"Dream will be there too, though," Techno said. "He's the top hero; he has to be."

"Schlatt will be as well," Tubbo added quietly. "That's one of the reasons he moved us to L'Manberg."

"So whatever they're doing, they'll be acting from the festival grounds," Phil said, pinching the bridge of his nose. "We have no choice but to be there. We can't stop them off-site."

"Puffy, Fundy and the rest of the Dream Team should be there too," Foolish noted. "Maybe if we can bring them back to their senses, it'll put an end to it all. Schlatt can hardly carry the whole operation alone."

"I wouldn't rely on it," Techno muttered. "Especially if the only way to clear their heads is pain."

The table fell into an uncomfortable quiet. Obviously, none of them were feeling over the moon about the prospect of hurting their friends; but they didn't want them to suffer under the Egg's control, either. Whatever happened at the Festival, it wasn't going to be an easy fight.

"We do have one thing," Ranboo said quietly, glancing up from his hands. "They don't know we know about their plans. When they make their move, we'll be expecting it, and that's not something they're ready for."

Phil nodded. "Ranboo's right," he said, standing from his chair, and immediately he had captured the attention of everyone present. Without Dream in the tower, Phil was the one in charge, and his command was undeniable as he let his wings spread a little wider and stood up straight. "We can't prepare for their plans when we don't know what they're planning. What we can do is prepare to react quickly, and shut things down before they escalate.

"If Schlatt and Dream are going to be there, we need eyes on them at all times. We need to ensure they don't have any chances to sneak away together; if we can cut their communication, that's immediately gonna make things difficult for them.

"If they're striking the first day of the festival, the place is gonna be packed. It's a big public event, and if things are gonna get violent — which I wouldn't doubt, given the nature of the 'egged' individuals — we need to make sure no civilians are caught in the crossfire. That means I'm gonna need a lot of you on crowd control, ready to evacuate people the second something happens.

"Third thing. Charlie and Sam, I need you two to pull up every record and piece of research we have on everyone's enhancements. If we all get egged, it's game over. We don't know for sure how to prevent it, but we can do our damn best to train our powers and make sure we're at the top of our game. I want training sessions every day, everyone in. If you're not training, you're on the streets. No fewer than groups of three. We still need eyes and ears on the local violence; look out for red eyes, and see if we can find out anything else that'll help."

Tommy blew out a long breath. It was a lot, and it kind of sounded like they were going to war... but Phil's steely expression and the certainty in his words at least gave the illusion that they had more control over everything than they probably did in actuality. It was comforting. If all else went to hell, at least they were in good hands.

"We're gonna need numbers," Sam warned the winged hybrid. "They match us in heroes under their control alone, nevermind any egged civilians or vigilantes they plan on bringing in."

"I know," Phil replied, and his wings drooped just a fraction as he met Tommy's eyes with a weary gaze. "That's why we'll be bringing *our* vigilantes."

This was met with uproar. Immediately, several others launched up from their seats; Wilbur was in their midst.

"They're not ready," Foolish snapped, sparing a glance at Michael and Connor. "Phil, they're still in training, for Primes' sake."

"They're kids!" Eret shouted.

"Tommy got shot just over a week ago!" Wilbur fumed, whipping around to face the older hero with a furious glare. "And they want him specifically. Primes, are you out of your mind?!"

"I want to be there," Tommy interrupted immediately, meeting Wilbur's gaze. "What if something happens to you?"

"What if something happens to you?!" the hero retorted.

"We don't have a choice," Phil announced loudly, drowning out the other complaints. "We need all hands on deck. If we go in there without the numbers, we may as well surrender. I don't like this any more than you do, but they're forcing our hand. And Tommy's right — if we were to fall facing the Egg, the vigilantes would be the only ones standing between them and total control. I won't do that to them. Not when they can stand with us."

"Tommy and I are the only ones who've fought off the mind control before," Ranboo added from his seat. His expression was gravely serious. "I'll do it. I'll go."

"So will I," Tubbo jumped in. "I know some of you don't trust me because of my dad, but... but what he's doing is wrong, and I want to stop him. I'm not a vigilante, and I don't want to be, but I'll train with you. Maybe my enhancement can help."

"Well fuck, I'm in," Connor relented. "What better way to spend your Monday than saving the city?"

Michael nodded in agreement. "Me too."

"And me," Purpled sighed. "Not that I have much choice; it'd be pretty lame if I was the only one who said no."

"You have a choice," Eret insisted.

"I was joking, I'm not missing a real life boss battle for the world."

"Hopefully it won't come to a battle," Phil sighed, "but we'll be ready if it does. If any of you know any other people who can fight — or are willing to help at all — the more the merrier."

Tommy nodded to himself thoughtfully. "I might know a few."

"Me too," Tubbo added. "Not everyone who worked with Dad liked him."

"Okay," Phil said. "You two get on that as soon as you can. Sam and Charlie, you have your work cut out for you. Tech, Eret, I need some sort of schedule in place for training, and Michael, Connor — you two can make sure the floor is prepped and ready for use, I want to start this afternoon. Foolish, you're with me. I want to reinforce security measures around the tower and smooth over a plan for the festival."

"And me?" Wilbur cut in, raising an eyebrow at the man.

"Mind the kids, Wil. Meeting dismissed."

Wilbur brought them back to SBI's floor as the heroes dispersed to do their respective tasks. The atmosphere hanging over their heads was an odd mix of horrified futility and weighted determination; Tommy's shoulders ached with the inevitability of the future, but for once it

was a burden shared by the group at large and made more manageable. The truth was the city was coming under attack whether they liked it or not, and they'd either fall with it or fight until they came out on top.

Purpled didn't seem as affected by the meeting as the rest of them; or at least if he was, he had no plans on lingering on bad thoughts. As soon as Wilbur had familiarised the vigilante with the layout of SBI's living area, he was pulling out a game console and booting up Mario Kart. It took little convincing for Tubbo and Ranboo to join him.

It was refreshing, admittedly, to hear the three laughing and joking again after sitting through such a tense conversation. Still, Tommy couldn't bring himself to kick back and relax altogether. He sat himself at the kitchen table instead, pondering the many topics they'd discussed while Wilbur made himself a cup of coffee.

They had no way of estimating the Egg's true power, nor how Schlatt and Dream planned on unleashing it, or even how big of a fight they'd put up. It could be an impossible task, taking them down; or it could be a walk in the park. Somehow, Tommy didn't think it would be that simple.

If they wanted to be sensible about it, they needed to be a force to be reckoned with, which meant they'd need as many people on their side as they could get. He was sure he could convince Quackity to give them a hand — if with a bit of bribery — and Niki would surely be willing to help, but he hadn't actually seen either of them in... ages. He couldn't be certain they weren't already infected, and even finding Quackity would be a challenge in itself, with how many districts the vigilante patrolled. And then there was another issue.

"I don't suppose I'm allowed to leave the tower," he said aloud, glancing up at Wilbur's back.

"Absolutely not."

"How am I supposed to gather people for the festival, then? Yeah I've got magic, but I'm not telepathic," Tommy said dryly. In the corner of his eye, Wilbur stood a little straighter at the reminder of his powers.

"We'll send someone else to fetch them," the hero replied evenly. "Hell, I'll go."

"What am I supposed to do, make little invitations?" Tommy scoffed. "Dear whoever, you're invited to the Egg versus heroes final showdown! Place: the festival grounds! Time: Whenever! Some of these people are vigilantes. They're not gonna trust people they don't know."

Wilbur sighed at Tommy's faux enthusiasm. "We're just trying to keep you safe."

"I can handle myself as well as any of you can. I kept myself alive the entire time I was a vigilante," Tommy argued.

"And then got shot."

"That was different! I was going directly into the enemy base."

Wilbur turned around to face him with a strained expression, stirring his mug. "Tommy, they're looking to kidnap you. There's no chance you're allowed out of this tower."

"We don't know they want to *kidnap* me," Tommy retorted. "Dream just said he wants me alive. Maybe it's a good thing! They *won't* kill me. It's not like anybody tried to kidnap me before."

"No, just convince you to join their egg cult and threaten violence against civilians and *us* if you didn't," Wilbur drawled.

"I'm not stupid," Tommy argued. "I know it's dangerous out there, especially for me. But I'm part of this whether you like it or not, and you've gotta trust me that I can handle myself!"

"Well, you're right! I *don't* like that you're part of this!" Wilbur snapped, setting down his cup. "I don't even think you should be going to the festival, I don't care what Phil says—"

"I *have* to go to the festival! I can't just sit here and wait, I *won't*—"

"You nearly *died*, Tommy!" Wilbur shouted, loud enough that the other three on the couch startled. They looked over with wide eyes, and only as Wilbur took a regretful breath, leaning back against the counter, did they hesitantly return to their game.

Tommy huffed, folding his arms and casting his gaze away. The wound still ached under his shirt if he shifted his awareness to it. It wasn't fair. He'd made one fatal mistake and now it would be held against him forever as proof that he wasn't good enough for a fight.

"You don't understand," Wilbur continued, voice lower, softer, and he sighed. "When you... when I found you, in that alley, and it was *you* and you'd passed out, and there was.... I thought I'd lost you," he admitted shakily. He took another breath. "I can't risk that again. I *won't*. If you... if something were to happen to you, I don't think I could live with myself knowing I could have stopped it. If you were to die... I'd feel like that's on me."

Tommy glanced back at the hero, softening as he took a moment to let the words register. "It wouldn't be your fault," he said softly. "It's my choice. I want to fight. I've *been* fighting."

"I know," Wilbur acceded, picking up his mug again as his shoulders fell. "I just want to keep you safe."

"I don't think I'll ever really be safe," Tommy admitted quietly. "Not if they want me that bad. Who's to say they wouldn't break into the tower if you didn't bring me, with nobody here to defend it?"

"It would be safer than being in the fight," Wilbur mumbled, though sounded less certain than he had been. "I'd stay with you."

Tommy shook his head. "You can't," he said, and Wilbur knew it too. "It's all hands on deck, you heard Phil. And that means me too."

Wilbur took a sip of coffee and swallowed bitterly. "I wish things had never come to this."

Tommy's shoulders sagged. "I know," he agreed quietly. "I should have stopped this ages ago. Should have known, should have said something—"

"Stop," Wilbur interrupted him. "None of this is your fault. Primes, Tommy, all this egg shit? That's all Schlatt and Dream. Nothing to do with you."

"But it has everything to do with me!" Tommy retorted. "The earliest case we have of red eyes, or an outburst of violence in the city? That was my old boss! And now, for whatever reason, *I'm* the most important person to this fucking cult."

Wilbur sipped at his coffee with a frown. It was clearly a thought lingering on *all* of their minds. "We'll figure it out," he said after a moment of deliberation. "And whatever they want from you, they won't get it."

Tommy glanced away, folding his arms. Even after such a long meeting, it was undeniable that they were still in the dark about *so much*. "All I know is that this all started with me," he said, "and I've gotta end it."

Wilbur's face pinched in on itself a bit more. He wasn't irritated, however; on the contrary, he looked as though he was accepting a heavy defeat.

"I'm sorry I didn't tell you I was a vigilante," Tommy continued, in the moment of quiet that followed. Tubbo, Ranboo and Purpled's laughter was a world away. "I've been worried about the wrong problems all summer, apparently."

"Don't apologise," Wilbur replied. "I've come to terms with it now. I get why you kept it secret."

"Would you have arrested me?" Tommy asked, wondering belatedly if he was pushing the boundary a little too far. "If I'd told you earlier?"

"No," Wilbur answered, in surprisingly short time. "I think... I think I would have thought about it. But I couldn't ever have done it. Not to you."

Tommy's heart warmed just a fraction at that. "I should have told you before. Properly. Not like... that."

Wilbur pondered that for a moment, holding his mug against his lips until he spoke again. "Would you ever have told me? If it hadn't come to that?"

"I... I wanted to," Tommy answered, unsure even himself what the truth was. "But I'd wanted to for ages. I think given more time, I would have, but honestly.... I was just so scared of you knowing." He swallowed heavily. "I didn't want to hurt you. But I knew I was already hurting you, just by being a vigilante, and then Ghostbur found out, and then I was dying, and... and the thought of dying without ever telling you the truth was worse than the thought that you might hate me when you found out."

Wilbur was quiet for a long moment, his gaze held firmly downwards as he let the words soak in. When he did speak again, his voice wasn't much more than a strained whisper. "I remember when Ghostbur found out. I didn't before. He hid it from me. But now... it's foggy, but it's there." His jaw tensed, and Tommy didn't want to think about the image in his mind; an unmasked vigilante collapsed on the floor of a dingy apartment, hands bloody and face wet with tears. "That was after the hospital, wasn't it?"

Tommy swallowed down his nausea at the reminder. "Yeah. That... wasn't a great night."

"I can't believe that was you," Wilbur murmured. "I know it was now, of course, but... part of me doesn't want to acknowledge it, I think. That you went through all that. Primes...."

"Yeah," Tommy agreed softly. "I don't think I want to acknowledge it either."

"Like I *know* you and Theseus are the same person," Wilbur continued, "but in my head, you're still... separate. Like Theseus doesn't fit the picture of you I made in my mind. It'll take getting used to."

"You have the whole picture now," Tommy said. "I promise. No more secrets."

"No more secrets," Wilbur agreed.

Tommy wasn't sure what to follow that up with. He didn't think he could say sorry enough to do justice for all his lies, but Wilbur didn't want to hear any more apologies, it seemed.

"And then there's the question of allowing you to continue being a vigilante," the hero added, and Tommy straightened sharply, heart sinking. "I thought for a little while that I'd have to ask you to stop. 'Cause *my* Tommy doesn't go on patrol and fight crime, or have insane magic powers, or wear a mask and a hero suit.... But Theseus *is* my Tommy, even if they're not the same picture just yet. And it's not my place to tell you to stop."

Tommy couldn't deny the wave of relief that crashed over him at those words. He hadn't made the decision himself to keep patrolling after all of this, but part of him knew intrinsically that it wasn't even a question. "Do you *want* me to stop?" he asked, a little hesitantly.

Wilbur frowned, and didn't reply immediately. Tommy grew more sure the answer was yes the longer the man remained quiet, deep in contemplation, but when Wilbur finally spoke, it wasn't quite what he was expecting.

"I don't think I have an answer for that," the hero murmured. "If you decided to stop, I'd support you wholeheartedly. You'd be safer, I think, if you didn't patrol, and whatever keeps you safe would always be the option I'd prefer. But if you want to keep patrolling, I wouldn't support you any less. Even if I'm still working on making Theseus and Tommy the same person in my head, my Tommy was still the kid who showed up injured every other day, who always wants to do the right thing. Theseus has always been a part of my Tommy, and I care about him as much as I do you. Because you're the same, and I'll do whatever I can to keep you safe. Even as a vigilante."

Tommy would have hugged the man if it didn't mean scrambling out of his chair and walking the whole way around the table. His heart swelled regardless; after months of suffocating guilt and regret and *fear*, hearing those words meant the world. Meant *more* than the world.

"You're my brother, Tommy," Wilbur continued softly, and the next words seemed to catch in his throat. "I—"

Oh, fuck it.

Tommy shoved his chair back from the table, and Wilbur met him halfway, coffee put to the side. The hug was clumsy, and maybe Tommy had knocked them off balance with the force at which he'd thrown himself into it, but Wilbur chuckled over his shoulder and a hand was gently brushing through the hair at the back of his head and Tommy was smiling wider than he had in ages.

"Thank you," he whispered, and every ounce of his heart was put into the words.

"Thank *you*," Wilbur returned, just as sincerely. "For showing me hope again."

And Tommy thought of XD, and the curse, and years of bitterness towards vigilantes that Wilbur hadn't been able to look past until just recently. How now, they were facing a threat much worse, and Wilbur was putting his trust in several vigilantes to fight at his side.

"I'll have to leave the tower, and I have to fight," he said, still holding his brother just as tightly. "But you'll be with me. And we'll look after each other."

Wilbur sighed, still no less reluctant to accept that deal. He pulled back just enough to meet Tommy's gaze, and pushed his hair up out of his eyes. "Alright, you can leave the tower. But Charlie has to approve it, and Techno's coming with us. No fewer than groups of three, like Phil said."

Tommy wasn't sure Quackity would be as cooperative if he showed up with two top heroes alongside him, but this was clearly the best deal he was going to get. It would have to do. "Okay."

Wilbur patted him on the shoulder. "Come on. Do you wanna show those three how you really play Mario Kart?"

Tommy grinned. "You're on."

Chapter End Notes

two very important conversations dealt with!! onto the fun parts ;)

apologies for the delay with this. again. i wrote the whole thing within a week of the last chapter and then delayed writing the last like 7 paragraphs until today!! idk why lol

we also have a final chapter count!! still an estimate and could change, but looking at about 7 more chapters <3 its been a wild ride omg crazy to be bringing this fic to a close

New Recruits

Chapter Summary

With only days before the Heroes Festival, the heroes need as many people as they can get to help them in the fight.

CW// descriptions of injury, violence

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for [notes](#)

Charlie had very reluctantly cleared Tommy for action again. Really, Tommy wouldn't even call it being cleared — more like they didn't have a choice but to bring in everyone who could fight (and everyone who couldn't) regardless of what state they were in. The others didn't seem too happy about this; Ranboo had voiced some worries and SBI certainly weren't over the moon, but Tommy would be lying if he said he wasn't eager for a training session with the tower's big heroes. Plus, while his wound still ached, it had healed over into a nasty purple mark which had at least stopped paining him with sharp stabs every time he bent at the waist.

And mentally... well, he was as ready as he'd ever be. Which was to say he didn't think he'd ever be one hundred percent prepared to don his suit again without his skin crawling or throat tightening, but he no longer felt as though he'd come apart at the seams wearing it for too long.

And perhaps fortunately, wearing his old suit wasn't in the cards at all anymore.

"I know it wasn't *horribly* damaged, but I'd still like to make some changes to the design anyways," Sam had explained, when Tommy went to the man looking for it. "So I'll hang onto it for just a few more days. Plus it was in dire need of a deep clean anyways."

"Yeah," Tommy agreed with a grim expression, thinking of the ash and sweat and blood ingrained in the material of the old suit. He and Ranboo had done their best to scrub it after bad patrols, but with the amount of electronics running through it, they'd been wary of using too much water. The thought of it being properly cleaned came as a relief.

"But I understand you're looking to leave the tower to find some new recruits," Sam continued, pulling out a folded black suit of some kind from under the table, "so I fetched one of Wilbur's first suits for you. It should fit fine; he was a little shorter at the time."

Tommy smiled, but raised an eyebrow at the suit regardless as he unfolded it. It seemed a little bulky, lacking the smooth, refined designs of Sam's latest suits. "How old is this thing?"

Sam grinned. "Old enough that it looks like that, but it's still functional. It'll do for a quick trip outside. Bulletproof, too."

Tommy's smile faltered for just a second. It wasn't like Sam was trying to hurt his feelings, so he wasn't sure why the remark stung; maybe because everyone seemed to still hold his near-fatal accident against him, despite the fact that he *knew* he was capable of defending himself. Maybe he still wanted to prove himself to them. Maybe any reminder of what had happened made his wound ache anew.

Sam picked up on his expression before he could fully school it, and frowned. "Sorry, I didn't mean to—"

"It's alright," Tommy assured him, throwing Wilbur's old suit over his arm and chasing the thoughts from his head. "Have you seen Tech and Wil? I was hoping to head out today."

"One more thing first," Sam interrupted, tossing him another smaller piece of material. He smiled. "Your mask."

"Oh yeah," Tommy said, catching it. He turned it over in his hands, looking at the goggles; it wasn't the same as the mask on his old suit, a little more makeshift. He'd nearly forgotten he still had his identity to keep secret from the general public, even if all the heroes were now in the know. "Thanks."

"I had to work fast, so I'm sorry it's nothing fancy, but it'll do the job."

"That's all I need," Tommy replied. Fingers crossed, he wouldn't be out for longer than an hour or two if he found Quackity quickly enough. At least Niki's location was pretty much guaranteed.

"It doesn't have a comm, but you shouldn't be leaving Wil or Techno far enough that you can't hear them anyway," Sam added, with a look that was as much a gentle warning as it was amused.

"I don't plan on it," Tommy said, which was true. He knew the difference between proving his own capabilities and being stupid, at least. "Thanks, Sam."

"Anytime, Tommy. Look after yourself."

"I will."

Wilbur and Techno were both back on SBI's floor when Tommy returned, and once they'd informed Phil they were going and given him an expected timeframe for their return, they made their leave. As Quackity and Niki both worked around the outer districts, they took Techno's car, and wore coats over their suits. Tommy wasn't sure they looked any more inconspicuous, given the time of year, but the two heroes had been insistent they blend in as much as possible.

Act natural. Pray nobody looked at them twice. Watch for red eyes.

Tommy had felt a lot safer in the city just a week ago. Knowing the full truth of L'Manberg's situation was both a blessing and a curse. They could prepare themselves now, but until their enemy made their move, their heads were buzzing with perpetual anxiety every step they took.

Techno pulled up outside Niki's bakery in record time, graced with driving outside of rush hour traffic. It was a little easier to pretend the world wasn't in imminent danger in a setting

so familiar and welcoming; Tommy was reminded fondly of the last time he'd been here with Wilbur. Primes, it had been so long ago. So much had changed, for the better or the worse.

The bell overhead chimed as Tommy pushed the door open, and the sudden blast of air conditioning came as a relief with his coat still on. Despite everything, the bakery was as busy as it had ever been; not too crowded, but certainly not empty. Couples and small groups were lounging and chatting amicably amongst themselves. Nobody seemed to give the heroes a second glance, too far away or too uncaring to recognise them, but Tommy still thought it would be safer to have their conversation in the back room.

He promptly pushed down the memories that arose of the last time he'd been in the back room.

"Hey Jack," he greeted Niki's coworker, keeping his posture casual as he approached the counter. Jack raised an eyebrow at him. Maybe too casual. "How are you, big man?"

"Alright, Tommy," Jack replied, and glanced at the two figures behind him. His eyes widened a fraction. "These — uh — these two are with you?"

Ah, yeah. Jack didn't know he worked at the tower, or was friends *family* with some of the top heroes. Hell, Jack didn't even know he was enhanced. It was all Niki and Tubbo who had helped him calm down that day.

"Techno and Wilbur," he introduced, gesturing to the heroes in turn. He glanced back at the pair; Wilbur was standing much stiffer than last time he'd been here, staring intently at where Jack's eyes were hidden behind his tinted glasses. Techno was much better at hiding how on edge he was, but Tommy knew him too well to pass his faux casual stance off as relaxed. He gestured to Jack. "This is Jack. He's got x-ray vision, by the way, which is just so cool."

Jack smiled appreciatively at the comment, and it served its purpose too, as he lifted his glasses for a moment to wink at the heroes. Belatedly, Tommy wondered if he could see their suits under their coats. His eyes, at least, weren't red. He could almost sense Wilbur and Techno relaxing behind him, if only fractionally.

"Is Niki around?" Tommy asked, cutting to the chase. They only had so much time they could spend chatting. "I'd love to talk to her."

"She's in the back," Jack said, stepping away. "Two seconds, I'll grab her."

Techno moved a little closer to Tommy as Jack left their line of vision. "It's a nice place here," he admitted. "Small, cosy. I like it."

Tommy grinned, glad it had both heroes' seal of approval. Sure it wasn't *his* bakery, but it was fourteenth, and it was home, in a way. As long as he'd been staying in first, he'd never lose his pride for the district.

"Yeah, last time we were here..." Wilbur trailed off, though didn't completely lose his smile. Tommy thought back to the conversation they'd had so long ago; this was where Wilbur had confessed to him the reason he had such a grudge against vigilantes. It was nearly symbolic, in a way, that their second visit was at a time when that grudge had been as good as resolved and Tommy's shoulders light with the absence of his lies. "Primes, that was a century ago."

"Not quite," a feminine voice interrupted playfully, and Niki approached with Jack behind her, leaning forward against the counter. She smiled at Wilbur. "Though it's nice to see you back here. The food can't have been that bad, if you've returned for a second visit."

"Or it's been so long that I've forgotten," Wilbur teased, and Tommy shot him a look, sure he'd taken it too far. Niki only laughed, however, and Wilbur smiled.

"Unfortunately we're not here to eat," Techno cut in politely, putting an end to the banter. Niki caught his gaze, and nodded, more serious.

"Jack said you wanted to talk," she said to Tommy, and spared the heroes another glance. "I'm guessing he didn't mean just a quick catch-up."

Tommy smiled, and shook his head. "Could we talk in the back, maybe?"

Niki glanced around at the scattered groups sitting around the place, and nodded. Her smile was a little tighter, now; she was smart. She knew, with two top heroes and a request for a private room, it was certainly no laid-back chit-chat they were looking for.

And laid-back chit-chat it was not. Tommy wasted no time beating around the bush, launching straight into an explanation of their recent discoveries and his run-ins with Schlatt. He could tell Wilbur and Techno weren't comfortable with him immediately divulging information they'd been putting effort into keeping on the down-low, but he trusted Niki. Even if she chose not to fight, she understood the gravity of the situation, and how important it was that they kept the extent of their knowledge to themselves. They couldn't afford any leaks.

"Why are you telling me all of this?" Niki asked. Her eyes were wide as she soaked in all the new information, though Tommy had a feeling the question was leaning on rhetorical. There was a spark of determination behind her obvious worry, a resigned but fierce sense of duty to the set of her shoulders. She would stand with them, he realised. He wasn't sure why he would have expected anything else.

"You've helped me in the past," Tommy said, meeting her gaze. "You're strong, and you can handle yourself in a fight. I don't want you to feel obliged to—"

"I'll fight with you," Niki cut him off, deadly serious. "If you think it's coming to a fight, I'll fight. I'll help however I can."

Wilbur seemed a little surprised by her certainty. "It'll be dangerous," he warned.

Niki shot him a grin that was all teeth. "Clearly you don't know much about growing up in fourteenth. I can look after myself."

Techno glanced at Tommy, smiling. "Sounds like someone I know."

Tommy shrugged in good humour. "It runs in the district."

"I'll need to be at the festival, then," Niki mused, pulling the conversation back to the main issue. "That's when you said they're striking?"

"Actually," Techno said, "if you're sure about helping, we'd like you at the tower. We're running training sessions until the festival begins, and you'll be given a proper briefing of the situation. A chance to get used to working as a team."

"To strengthen our chances," Niki agreed, nodding her understanding. "Okay. I can pack some things tonight and be there tomorrow morning. I'll have to ask Jack if he'll be okay covering for me for—"

"He won't."

Tommy whirled around in shock as Jack's voice interrupted them; the young man was standing just inside the closed doorway of the room, and looked as though he had been for some time, given the light slouch of his shoulders. Tommy wasn't the only one gaping in shock; both of the heroes at his sides were tensed, and even Niki was caught off guard.

"How much did you hear?" Wilbur demanded, niceties immediately set to the side.

"Pretty much all of it," Jack admitted with a shrug. "Sorry, I was just nosy. And — *wow*, I thought *my* life was crazy — you guys must be stressed."

Stressed is an understatement, Tommy thought dryly.

Techno straightened suddenly and stepped towards Jack. With his shoulders squared, he loomed over anybody; but he certainly wasn't fucking around now, as even Tommy nearly shrunk back from the tense anger radiating off of the hero, and he couldn't even see the expression only Jack had the honour of witnessing. Suit concealed or not, Techno was *the Blade* right now.

Belatedly, he realised Jack overhearing everything meant his identity had once again been compromised. He wondered if Techno had caught that too, and if that was the reason why the extent of his intimidation was almost personal.

"You're not to repeat a *word*," Techno growled, and Tommy recalled why his public reputation was far scarier than the Techno he was familiar with, "of what you just heard. Actually—" He glanced at Wilbur, who seemed to share his sentiments, "we can't afford to let you go now. I don't trust you, and I certainly don't trust you with *this* — you'll have to come back to the tower with us."

Jack made a face. "Well I was going to offer to go and help anyways, but now you've made it way less cool."

Niki sighed. "You were supposed to stay at the counter."

"Well, I didn't. And good thing, too, because it sounds like you guys need all the help you can get."

Wilbur huffed, crossing his arms. "You're not wrong."

"Can you fight?" Techno asked, skeptical and still tense.

Jack shrugged. "Probably not as well as you'd hope, but I'm not useless. I'm good with gadgets, and I'm sure you can find a use for my enhancement."

Techno's eyes narrowed. "I still don't trust you won't spill."

"Why would I?" Jack argued, though he didn't seem offended. "These egg nutters don't sound like a friendly crowd, and what you know about them being a secret sounds like the only upper hand you have."

"Again, not wrong," Tommy admitted.

"Jack won't tell anyone," Niki assured the heroes. "He may be an idiot, but he's a good friend."

"If you trust him, I do," Tommy said, and Jack smiled.

Reluctantly, Techno backed down, glancing at Tommy for half a second before jabbing a finger at Jack. "In the Watchtower by nine tomorrow morning. And if you tell a soul what you heard, I'll know about it."

"You are terrifying," Jack replied politely. "I'll be there."

And so Tommy's search for one recruit led to two.

They didn't stay long at the bakery afterwards. They still had Quackity to find, and the time they were supposed to be back at the tower was approaching more rapidly than expected. Tommy gave Niki and Jack his best wishes, looking forward to seeing them tomorrow. And then they left.

Techno drove them to the centre of seventh; it was Quackity's home district — or at least, Tommy suspected. The vigilante patrolled several districts, but fourteenth's border with seventh was where Tommy had seen him the most earlier in the summer. The only issue was Tommy was fairly certain wherever Quackity's base was, a whole load of weapons he'd taken off worse criminals were too. Neither Techno nor Wilbur would be impressed if they discovered the vigilante's... hobby.

"We're not gonna find him just walking around the place," Tommy explained, as Techno parked the car on a quiet street Tommy didn't recognise. "Quackity spends most of his time patrolling. Way more than I did. And he has wings — he doesn't stay on the ground. He could be anyway, really. We might not even find him today, unless we split up to cover more ground—"

"Absolutely not," Wilbur cut in sharply. "It's too risky. Phil said groups of three, and so a group of three we'll stay."

Tommy bit his cheek. "Yeah, about that—"

Techno raised an eyebrow disapprovingly, and Wilbur's stare only hardened. Well, they were never going to have liked this part of the plan. That was the reason he'd left it til the last second to tell them.

"When — *if* — we find Quackity, I have to go with him alone," Tommy explained, and rushed to elaborate before either of the heroes could interrupt. "Listen, vigilantes aren't going to appreciate two big heroes trying to corner them, even if I'm with you. *Especially* Quackity. If I want him to hear us out, I need to talk to him alone first."

"If he doesn't trust us enough to even speak with us, how is he gonna want to come back to the tower and train with us? Or fight with us at all?" Wilbur questioned, his tight expression clearly reflecting what he thought of all this.

"I can convince him," Tommy said, forcing a little more certainty into his voice than he really felt. "I just need time. And to be alone."

"Is he safe?" Techno asked.

This time Tommy was more sure. "Yes. Quackity's a friend; he wouldn't hurt me."

"Okay then," Techno agreed reluctantly.

Wilbur made a face, but didn't argue any further. Tommy smiled at them.

"It'll be fine, fellas," he promised cheerfully. "Will we get going?"

The three removed their disguises, Tommy donned his mask, and they took to the rooftops of seventh. It was unfamiliar territory, but a similar enough layout to fourteenth, if a bit wealthier. And smaller, too; Tommy could see all four of its borders with its surrounding districts from any decently tall building.

It was the first time he'd *really* used his magic in front of Techno and Wilbur with them *knowing*. It was odd, at first. He could feel Wilbur's gaze on his back every time he let red pour from his fingertips or used his power to boost himself across a particularly wide gap between buildings; but the longer they searched, the easier it was to ignore him and give in to the thrill of his magic. A grin was stretching his face by the time they were twenty minutes in; he hadn't felt this free in months. The last of his patrols had been filled with fear and pressure and pain — he had missed the freedom and excitement of his early days as a vigilante.

There was only one big dampener. No matter what crimes they saw taking place in the streets below, they couldn't interfere. They had to stay off the Egg's radar as much as possible — at least with Tommy — and that meant staying up and out of sight. Even if people were hurting.

Tommy didn't like it. But he was lucky to be allowed out of the tower at all.

They were coming up on forty minutes of combing the district when they finally had a stroke of real luck. Techno spotted it first; another conflict in the streets at first glance, but this one had a key difference. Darting between the other individuals was a speedy hybrid sporting a pair of short brown wings.

"Is that our guy?" Techno asked, pointing him out to Tommy.

Tommy's heart kicked up a gear. "Yeah," he answered, and moved to drop down and help the vigilante.

Wilbur grabbed his shoulder, stopping him. "You can't," he reminded him, somewhat sympathetically. "Just wait."

It was painful, being able to do nothing but watch as Quackity took down the criminals one by one, but Tommy at least knew he was a capable fighter. Watching the conflict proved this, and he was proud on Quackity's behalf as Wilbur and Techno exchanged an impressed glance when Quackity put the last man to the ground. He began searching the pockets of every person he had downed, however, and the heroes immediately frowned.

"What's he doing?"

Checking for guns he can sell, Tommy thought miserably, but cleared his throat regardless. "Uh, making sure they're not still armed, I think." He took that as his cue to drop down. "Stay here. I'll be quick."

"Be safe," Wilbur insisted, and reluctantly let his hand slip from Tommy's shoulder.

Tommy nodded, and leapt from the rooftop without another word. They didn't have much time left. He caught himself steadily with his magic, and didn't waste a breath before hurrying across the street.

Quackity was still tensed, and whirled around as Tommy called to him, wings flared and staff pointed at the boy's throat. Tommy winced a little, sure that didn't look great to the watching heroes.

"Sorry, sorry!" he apologised, hands raised in a friendly surrender. "I should have warned you."

"Theseus!" Quackity exclaimed, finally recognising him as he caught sight of the red wisps between his fingers. He relaxed visibly, retracting his staff. "Man, you scared me. You don't look like you used to."

Oh yeah, Tommy thought belatedly. *Different suit*. "Yeah, I uh, got an upgrade."

Quackity raised an eyebrow at the suit that definitely wasn't an improvement on the old one, but didn't press the issue. He met Tommy's eyes instead — or goggles, rather — with a note of concern in his gaze. "I haven't seen you in ages, man, I was getting worried. Too many people going missing recently."

Well, Quackity being more well-informed on the current issues would make explaining things much easier.

Tommy shook his head. "Nah, I'm okay. Just, uh, had a bad injury."

Quackity nodded in understanding. "Well, I'm glad you're back." He gestured to the pile of unconscious bodies around them. "Things just keep getting worse, ay?"

"Tell me about it," Tommy muttered. He glanced at the bodies curiously. "They have red eyes?"

Quackity nodded again. "You've noticed that too?"

"Yeah," Tommy admitted, taking a nervous breath. "A lot of people have. The heroes up in the Watchtower too."

Quackity straightened a fraction, smile dropping. "You've been talking to heroes?"

"I have been for a long time," Tommy admitted, watching the man's body language cautiously, trying to gauge how far he could go before Quackity ran off. "They're really good people, Big Q. Better than I ever thought."

Quackity's wings were raised. "What are you doing here, Theseus?" he asked, any note of friendliness in his voice gone. "You don't patrol seventh."

"I need to talk to you," Tommy said as sincerely as he could manage. It felt borderline pleading. "The red eyes thing? It's big. *Huge*. I need your help."

"The *heroes* need my help," Quackity inferred. He was still skeptical, but his wings had dropped a fraction; the fact he hadn't run yet spoke enough about how dangerous he already knew the red-eyed people were.

Tommy nodded. "As much help as they can get."

Quackity was quiet for a long moment, gears turning in his skull. Tommy thought for a second he might refuse, but then, "I'll bring you to my place," he said. "It's safe. We can talk there."

Tommy sighed, knowing Wilbur and Techno wouldn't like this, but nodded. He didn't think Quackity was going to hear him out otherwise. "Okay," he agreed, "but I don't have a lot of time. It'll have to be quick."

"It's just around the corner," Quackity assured him.

Quackity led him — thankfully — not far from where they'd been, and Tommy had to force himself to keep his eyes ahead, tempted to glance back and see if Wilbur and Techno were following them. He wasn't sure if it would be better or not if they were; as Quackity gestured to a very much abandoned building, he couldn't help but feel a little unsettled.

He climbed in through what should have been a window, but had no glass, and had to admire the interior as Quackity followed him in. It was surprisingly neat and tidy for what the building looked like initially; there were a few old couches on a rug, numerous cupboards pushed to the walls, and more guns on a coffee table than Tommy would have thought fit on such a small space. His stomach turned looking at them, and he glanced away.

"Not much, but it's home," Quackity said, sitting on a couch and gesturing for Tommy to join him. "You should've seen it *before* I got the furniture."

"It's nice," Tommy said kindly, because it wasn't necessarily *bad*, but he couldn't help but think how much better off Quackity would be if he joined the vigilante program. An issue for a later discussion, he decided. One step at a time.

"So," Quackity began, gesturing at him. "Red eyes. What's happening?"

Tommy took a breath. *Here we go.*

He rattled off almost the same speech he'd given Niki, if a little faster, being careful to cover up any parts that compromised his identity. But the hospital, the gala, the incident at Schlatt's building, what they'd heard from the bug, the gang violence, the red eyes, their plans so far, everything else he spilled to the vigilante as quickly and briefly as he could sum it up.

Quackity appeared triply as concerned as he had been originally when Tommy finished speaking, face pale and wings drawn tight. It was unnerving to see the vigilante usually so laid-back without his easy-going smile; Tommy couldn't help but wonder just how much of this he'd experienced himself.

"So they're a hive mind?" was his first question, fingers tapping at the couch.

"We're not one hundred percent on that, but it makes the most sense given... everything," Tommy replied. "Which is why we've gotta be really careful about what we say and to who. Our only advantage right now is that they don't know we're onto them."

Quackity nodded seriously. "You trust me that much?"

"You're a good person, and a good fighter," Tommy replied. "And a good friend. We could really use you."

Quackity didn't acknowledge that. "Can it be cured? The... egg mind control?"

Tommy winced. "We don't really know. At the hospital... I think it was pain that helped that kid fight it. But nobody wants to hear that."

"No shit," Quackity breathed, eyebrows knitting together. "That's horrible."

Tommy swallowed heavily. "I know."

"But it doesn't make sense," Quackity insisted. "I fight these guys every day. And there's still this many of them? If everyone I beat up is cured, how do they have so many numbers?"

Tommy squirmed uncomfortably. He hadn't actually thought of that. "Well, it is still a working theory. We haven't considered that cured people can be reinfected either, which is probably very possible."

"And if we do all go and fight them?" Quackity questioned. "What's stopping them from just infecting us all? We can't win against that."

"Some enhancements have been able to fight it off," Tommy pointed out, though had to admit Quackity's doubts were getting to him. "Mine did. And a friend's. Yours is luck, maybe you'll be safe."

Quackity shook his head. "And if I am? Even if they only infect half of us, there's no way who's left would have a chance."

"Dream and Schlatt are the ones infecting people, we think," Tommy argued weakly. "If we keep them occupied—"

"You're wrong," Quackity cut in sharply. "If it was just the two of them, there wouldn't be an army of red eyes in the city right now. Whatever they're using to accomplish this — this Egg, the power source — *that's* what you need to be worried about. Nevermind the festival, if you don't find and destroy this thing, we're all doomed."

Tommy was left at a loss. And it sucked, because Quackity was *right*. There was a reason everyone in the tower was feeling as hopeless as they were; even he'd known, buried somewhere underneath false hopes and determination fueled by his own guilt, that they were talking about an impossible fight.

"Even if I were to help you, Theseus, I wouldn't be any real help," Quackity said, shaking his head. "The heroes' plan is bad at best. The city's a goner."

"But are we not better off standing together at least?" Tommy argued, chest heavy. "Shouldn't we at least try? This is exactly why we need more people — you have an outside point of view, you showed me the flaws in our plan—"

"So fix it," Quackity said, standing. "And if you have better odds, come back to me. But as it is, I'm no help to you. Nobody is."

Tommy's face and heart fell, and he slumped into his seat. He didn't know where to even start looking for the Egg. They didn't know what it was, what it looked like, was it even a physical thing — the festival was a matter of days away.

Quackity was right. They were fucked.

"Any lucky guesses as to where we should start look—" Tommy began, but was cut off by a muffled crash from the floor below. Quackity visibly suppressed a flinch. "What was that?"

"It's an old building," Quackity replied with a shrug, though his face was tight. "Bits and pieces fall apart all the time."

Reluctantly, Tommy accepted the excuse. It probably wasn't important. Not compared to what he had to tell Wilbur and Techno when he got back.

"I think you should get going," Quackity advised, when he didn't speak. "It's been a while."

"Yeah," Tommy agreed softly. "Big Q... if you change your mind—"

"I know where to find you," Quackity finished. "If I figure anything out for you, I'll let you know."

"Thanks," Tommy mumbled, standing. "I hope I see you soon, then."

"Me too," Quackity agreed quietly. "Adios, mi amigo."

Theseus left the building looking defeated, and Quackity couldn't deny the ball of guilt in his chest knowing he'd been the one to do that to him. He was just a kid, even if he pretended he wasn't — but that was part of why Quackity needed to point out all the holes in the heroes' grand plan. They were bringing that kid to his downfall, and he needed to know it.

It was a little unnerving, how easily Theseus trusted the big shots up in that shining tower. Granted, he was a kid, and was bound to be naive, but it had never been a secret that as vigilantes, the heroes were not their allies. And if they hadn't arrested him, they wanted something from him.

Nothing in life came for free. Quackity had learned that the hard way.

But at least Theseus knew now that the heroes weren't as perfect as they'd had him believe. Had Quackity said anything outright about their intentions, he knew the kid would deny it, wouldn't believe it, but this way he could figure it out for himself. He'd be better off for it if he did; this Egg business was serious shit, and if the heroes really wanted them involved, Quackity could guarantee it was because vigilantes were expendable.

But speaking of Egg shit....

There was another muffled thump from downstairs and Quackity sighed, letting his wings droop. Should he have told Theseus? Asked him to stop talking? Moved to another location?

He hadn't really wanted to believe the situation was as bad as Theseus made it out to be. He still didn't. But the idea of a hive mind, as outrageously unbelievable as it sounded, was troubling.

"You still up?" he called, rounding the corner to descend the rickety wooden stairs to the darker ground floor of the building. The windows down here were boarded over, the air humid and musty. It didn't make for great living quarters, but as far as hiding spots went, it wasn't too bad.

"Red," Karl whispered, straining against his bonds. "Red."

"If you quit squirming, you wouldn't hit your head so much," Quackity murmured, sitting opposite the man with a sad smile. He spared the tray of untouched food at his side a glance. "You haven't eaten either."

"Red—"

"I know," Quackity sighed. "Did you hear much of that conversation? I hope not."

Karl was mumbling rapidly under his breath, still pulling at the ropes keeping him tied firmly to one of the room's pillars. Quackity's heart sank as he took in the other man's foggy red eyes. He'd wanted to let him go, hoped foolishly that he might be safe, or stay, but every time he gave him another chance Karl either attacked him or tried to escape. Quackity wouldn't let them have him. They could have his mind, but wherever they would lead him physically, it wasn't going to be any safer or kinder a place than Quackity's basement.

And with him here, Quackity might actually be able to do some good. For *all* of their sakes.

"Red all over," Karl whispered, voice hoarse. "I've seen it. Red city. Red. *Red.*"

"Yeah, yeah," Quackity murmured softly. "Just tell me where it's coming from, Karl. Can you do that?"

Tommy had relayed Quackity's opinions to the heroes as soon as they returned to the tower, and while there was a general agreement that the vigilante had a point, it wasn't like there was a whole lot they could do. With the bug now in their hands, they didn't have any more information to extract from Schlatt or Dream, and nobody on the inside to spy on them personally.

All they could do was train and fight. Phil seemed hopeful that they'd find the Egg, this power source, in Schlatt or Dream's hands at the festival. Tommy, in all honesty, wasn't so sure anymore.

But he trained and fought nonetheless. Because what else was there to do?

For just under a week, everyone they had gathered spent every free moment sparring and studying each other and testing their enhancements to their limits. They observed and learned, fought training dummies, fought each other. Charlie had lists of notes on every hero, vigilante and civilian in the tower and their enhancements longer than any stack of paperwork Tommy had ever seen. Sam was working double time in the lab when he wasn't actively sparring, keeping their equipment and suits at their best. Jack was helping him out whenever he wasn't going over the basics of hand-to-hand with Niki and Punz and Ponk, who Tubbo had called in. Tommy worked mainly with Techno and the other vigilante-mentor pairs.

It made it a bit easier, being surrounded by the people he loved even when things were so hopeless. Sometimes they really convinced him that it would all be okay. Sometimes he really believed it, too; that just maybe they'd make it out on top, because if he loved them so much, they were protected from what could hurt them.

They had to be.

"Wider stance, Tommy! Hold your position," Techno called to him, and Tommy shifted his feet accordingly. "Ranboo and Purpled are naturally better suited to defense; if you can force them to come to you, you'll have better opportunities to strike."

"You know they can hear you too, right?" Tommy called back to him, jumping back as Purpled lunged towards him, stopped by a rising wall of thick vines.

"Good, Tubbo!" Phil praised the boy. "That's good. Stay on your toes and support Tommy from a distance, like we've practiced."

"Ranboo!" Tommy called back to Tubbo, as his roommate disappeared from Purpled's side with a *pop*.

There was a yelp from Tubbo as he was engaged head-on, but Tommy just had to trust he could handle himself as Phil shouted guidance and the vines keeping Purpled back from Tommy shrunk down.

"Gotcha," Purpled said with a sharky grin.

Tommy hit him with a mild blast of magic to the chest, staggering the vigilante. "Nope."

Purpled let the momentum carry him into a showy backflip, and Tommy squashed down the temptation to chase after him. Techno was right; Purpled's enhancement didn't lend itself to offense as much as it did defense. If Tommy could force him into the role of attacker, he could take the win easily.

"Remember last time we fought one-on-one?" Purpled asked slyly. Tommy let his magic run between his fingers, watching the boy patiently. He knew it was a taunt, a call for Tommy to move first. He just had to wait it out. "How quickly did I beat you? Was it... five minutes?"

Well, I was starving half to death. "So much confidence for someone who's not doing much winning right now," Tommy shot back with a grin.

Bingo. Eret shouted to warn his apprentice, but Purpled had already darted forward with a scowl, falling for the bait. Tommy dropped to the side, kicking out firmly with a leg that caught Purpled in the shins. The vigilante yelped and stumbled forwards, and Tommy didn't hesitate to spring back up and throw another blast of red at his back as he did. Purpled was prepared this time, however, and let his clone take the hit, jumping back into a defensive stance with his fists up and ready.

"Yeah, that was a real winning move," Tommy teased, as the two fell into a slow circle of movement.

"He's goading you," Eret called to Purpled, this time effectively informing Tommy's opponent of his plan. "Don't let him control the combat."

"Your magic has range, Tommy, use it," Techno advised.

He had a point. Tommy could still force Purpled onto the offense; if not through taunts, then physically pushing him forward. He grinned to himself, an idea putting itself together in his head — he hadn't used his magic in such a way before, but it was worth a try.

"You'd hit a poor, innocent kid where he can't hit you back?" Purpled asked, feigning a fearful expression.

"Not like the Egg cult's gonna play fair," Tommy remarked, and cast out a hand. A wave of scarlet magic shoved Purpled forward from behind, and Tommy leapt ahead with a red-encased fist to strike a startled Purpled right in the chest. Purpled stumbled backwards, winded, and had to let a clone take his place for the next two balls of magic Tommy fired at him.

"Yes, keep it going, kid!" Techno called to him, and Tommy felt a burst of pride in his chest. "Don't let him relax, you've got him!"

Tommy kept up his barrage of magic, throwing ball after ball of his power after Purpled with every bit of strength he could summon. It was, of course, letting Purpled resume his preferred defensive play, but it wasn't easy in the slightest as he was forced into rapidly creating clones or taking the hits himself.

"Fuck man, you don't get tired of this?" Purpled asked him as he rolled beneath another blast, voice strained.

Tommy grinned; his magic was singing beneath his skin, positively gleeful with being let free. "Not really."

He flung another ball of red at his opponent, and wasn't surprised as a clone absorbed it again before dissipating into the air. He wasn't getting many hits on Purpled, but that was the cost of sparring offensively against him; all he could really do was tire him out. This time, however, Purpled had rolled towards him instead of maintaining their circle.

Being forced to rapidly switch into a defensive stance unbalanced Tommy, and if it weren't for his magic shielding him on instinct, Purpled would have landed numerous punches as the vigilante propelled himself into a fast-paced attack. Tommy stumbled backwards further and further, doing all he could to maintain his footing and shield himself from the oncoming blows. Purpled had already been tired before he'd begun this onslaught; all he had to do was just hold out a little longer....

There.

Purpled took just a second after his last punch to catch his breath, arm still half-extended in the air, and Tommy swung a leg into the boy's ribs and knocked his opponent right over.

"Tapping out?" he asked the other vigilante, chest heaving from his own efforts, but Purpled was pushing himself back up when he was interrupted.

"Tubbo is out!" Wilbur called, and Tommy whipped around to check on his teammate when he heard a familiar *pop* behind him and was pulled into a headlock.

Ranboo, he thought belatedly, grappling at the arm squeezing just enough around his neck to be uncomfortable. Even sparring, *Ranboo* couldn't bring himself to really hurt Tommy. And while Tommy didn't *want* to take advantage of that fact, he did make it quite easy to.

Wary that *Purpled* would be back in action in a matter of seconds too, Tommy reached back to grasp *Ranboo*'s upper arms firmly and let his magic pour from his palms. A trick he hadn't used since his early vigilante days, stuffing his power into objects and making them explode, but it was an old reliable and he knew his magic could burn when he wanted it to. Sure enough, *Ranboo* cried out and immediately let go.

Tommy rolled forward to turn and face the pair from a comfortable distance, but *Purpled* was closer than he'd remembered and already mid-punch. Tommy grimaced as he turned enough to let his arm take hit, knowing it would bruise, and just managed to shoot another ball of magic at the purple-clad vigilante with his other hand to keep them both off of him for a second.

Purpled was embracing the offensive stance Tommy had been encouraging him to take the whole fight, and now with *Ranboo* at his side and no *Tubbo* on Tommy's, he was outmatched unless he could pull out a winning move that would end things swiftly.

Surrender? *Ranboo* signed to him with a cheeky smile, as *Purpled* fell back to stand beside him.

Tommy shook his head in amusement. *You wish*, he signed back.

Ranboo promptly vanished, and Tommy had the sense to duck and spin before he could be caught in another headlock. *Ranboo*'s arms closed over open air, and Tommy launched himself upwards to headbutt his roommate's chin. Unfortunately, their notable difference in height meant this didn't exactly have the desired effect, and Tommy had to rapidly improvise and shove *Ranboo* back with a magic-assisted push as he heard footsteps rushing him from behind.

He whirled around to deflect *Purpled*'s incoming fist with an upward swipe of his forearm, using his magic to keep *Ranboo* further back still with his other hand. He could feel the eyes

of the heroes — and indeed now the others in the huge room — watching him closely; fighting two other well-trained vigilantes on his own was a challenging test of anyone's abilities, his especially. He'd been training with the others and the heroes all week, of course, but he still hadn't pushed himself as far as he knew he could go. And part of him would always jump at the opportunity to impress SBI.

Blocking out the small audience his fight had gathered, Tommy gathered his focus and energy and gave everything he had to the rest of the match. Knowing his efforts had at the least staggered Ranboo, he engaged Purpled head-on. In hand-to-hand alone, the boy outmatched him, but Tommy had better durability and knew the other was tiring fast. He matched Purpled's punches until he had an opening; a quick jab to the throat with the side of his hand slipped through the vigilante's defenses and left him hunched over and gasping for air.

Just in time for Ranboo to recover enough to go after Tommy's back again. As good as Ranboo had gotten under Wilbur's excellent training, Tommy far outmatched him in experience alone from his months on the streets at night; but Ranboo knew this too. Instead of attempting to fight Tommy face-to-face, Ranboo began rapidly teleporting around him. Tommy was forced to withhold his pride for how far Ranboo had progressed with his enhancement for the moment — which, *wow*, Ranboo had *not* been able to do this a month ago and he was seriously impressed — just to maintain his focus enough to keep up with his roommate's seemingly random pattern. Ranboo managed to get one or two hits in that Tommy couldn't block, but the third time he was just a fraction too slow; Tommy grabbed his wrist as he went to throw a punch, and threw a wall of magic right into his opponent. Ranboo crumpled. But he'd nearly forgotten there was more than just Ranboo to worry about—

A blunt force crashed into the soft part of his torso right beneath his ribs, and Tommy's vision flashed white as an almost ghostly pain shot through his stomach, ripping and burning — his magic reacted in an instant, exploding from every part of his body and chasing the pain out with it. When Tommy opened his eyes, he was on his hands and knees on the padded floor, chest heaving and shirt drenched in sweat. Purpled was lying spread-eagled on the other side of the room, groaning faintly.

"I think we have a winner," Techno announced, breaking the odd silence that had fallen over the room. "Uh — someone go check on Purpled, maybe."

Tommy pushed himself to his feet again, almost surprised he still had the strength to. Curious, he lifted his shirt enough to brush a sweaty hand over the purple scar that remained from his gunshot wound, but the touch didn't elicit any pain. There was little feeling in the

small patch of skin at all; he wasn't sure if the sudden agony he'd just experienced had been real or in his head.

"Alright, kid?"

He glanced up to meet Techno's mostly proud but also a subtle kind of worried gaze, and nodded, smiling.

"Yeah, I'm great, actually. Did you see that win? Two-vee-one! Aced it."

"Sorry about that," Tubbo butted in, hurrying over. "I'm no good at that close quarters stuff. Ranboo got me pretty good."

"No worries, Big T," Tommy assured him, clapping a hand over his shoulder. "You've gotten insanely good with your plant things, anyways. And hey, since you're on my team, you still win!"

Tubbo grinned wide. Phil was the next to approach, eyebrows raised in a kind of awe Tommy's inner child ascended to heaven seeing aimed at him. Actually, fuck that, his entire self could have ascended to heaven. He felt like Prime herself.

"That was really impressive, mate," Phil admitted, and the feeling multiplied by about a thousand. "You're gonna make one hell of a hero some day. Could definitely be number one, with a few years more training."

Tommy's chest was just shy of bursting with the intense swell of happiness and pride filling it with warmth. "Yeah, well, that was pretty fucking poggers of me, huh?"

"Don't pump his ego too big, Phil," Wilbur teased, and Ranboo was right behind him, smiling broadly at Tommy. "We don't need two Technoblades in the tower."

Techno just rolled his eyes. Tommy didn't bother entertaining Wilbur with a response, stepping towards Ranboo instead with a sheepish grin.

"Didn't hit you too hard, did I?"

Ranboo shook his head. "Don't worry, no harm done. But man, that was really cool. I don't think I've ever seen you fight like that — except maybe yesterday, actually, but your magic today was insane."

Yesterday Tommy had taken on a training dummy on SBI's floor again — the same one he'd fought so long ago behind their backs when he was supposed to have been cleaning up. This time he had demolished Wilbur's high score, and the hero had been there to witness it. Tommy had been a bit nervous to really let loose in front of the man, but Wilbur was getting more and more used to seeing him with his powers now. It was still a little surreal, openly using them in front of him.

"Thanks Ranboob," Tommy replied, and Techno snorted at the nickname. He glanced around his roommate to check on his other opponent, who was making his way over with Eret. "Sorry about that, Purpled. My magic kinda did its own thing at the end there, I didn't mean to hit that hard."

"No, it's alright, I think I only shattered my spine," Purpled waved him off, and Tommy grinned. "Though I'm *actually* sorry — about the kick. I totally forgot about your, uh, wound thing."

Phil interrupted before Tommy could reassure the vigilante, blinking owlishly at his assistant. "Is that what set that off? Is it still bothering you? Is it opened again—?"

"No, no, no," Tommy waved him off quickly, nearly amused by the man's mother hen instincts. He thought back on his words. "Actually, yes, no, no."

There was no point in lying; anything remotely interesting about their enhancements was to be reported back immediately to Charlie so it could be added to their respective notes. Tommy's was an enhancement they still knew very little about, especially regarding its limits,

and the fact that it had a mind of its own. Figuring out what caused it to flare up of its own accord would help them at least understand how it worked — at best, utilise it in combat. Not that they had much time left.

He nearly shivered at the thought. The Festival began tomorrow, officially. This afternoon, they were ceasing all training to give their bodies some much-needed rest, and Phil and Foolish were hosting one more big meeting in the evening to smooth over every little detail of the plan. After that? A night of restless rolling over and over in his bed, for sure, and then it was game time.

"I am sorry man," Purpled repeated, "genuinely, did not mean to hit you where it hurts—"

"It's okay, honest," Tommy cut him off, nodding assurances. "Hey, I did say the Egg cult won't play fair. And it didn't even hurt, really — well, uh, *doesn't* hurt. Anymore. I think I kinda imagined the pain more than it was real."

Phil frowned; he wasn't the only one. "That sounds more like a mental ordeal than a physical one, then," he mused, and his face fell. "Primes, I wish Puffy were here. The second we get her back, I think you should have a nice long chat with her. She's great for that kind of thing."

If *we get her back*, Tommy corrected him instinctively, and his own smile faltered. As strong as they'd all gotten in the past week alone... he could only hope it was enough.

He didn't get a chance to respond to Phil. The second he opened his mouth, the doors to the training room were being thrown open, in hurrying Niki and Jack and a bruised, slightly bloodied Connor, who looked as though he'd been dragged through a ditch several times over.

Tommy's blood ran cold. Connor was supposed to be patrolling with Foolish and Michael.

"We ran into him in the elevator," Niki explained, face screwed up with worry. "We were just on our way up here to meet you—"

"Connor?" Eret called, hurrying over to the banged up vigilante with gentle hands outstretched. "Are you alright? Did something happen?"

"Where's Foolish and Michael?" Techno questioned, stepping forward.

"Gone," Connor gasped, spitting blood. He was horribly out of breath even after the elevator ride up. "Egged. They just — they started attacking me, and I saw the eyes and I just — ran."

"Let's get you to Charlie," Eret encouraged him, gently leading the younger back towards the elevator. "You did good coming back here straight away, yeah?" She shook her head pointedly at Phil. "Phil."

The winged hero nodded in response, stepping forward before turning to the others. "All of you stay put, alright? Nobody goes anywhere alone, not even in the tower. Niki, Jack, are Punz and Ponk on the way up?"

"They — uh, they said they were, yeah," Jack answered.

"Make sure they are. Tech, Wil, you're in charge. Look after everyone, keep the training going for the newer recruits. I'll be back."

And then he was gone, and Connor and Eret with them.

The room was horribly, horribly silent. Tommy could feel his heart beating against his throat, the cold, choking sensation of any hope they'd been hanging onto dying.

Ranboo and Tubbo moved closer to him on either side, and he shamelessly let himself lean on the shallow comfort their presence provided.

"How many are we down to now?" Jack asked quietly.

Too few, Tommy thought, swallowing heavily. It was Techno who took it upon himself to answer out loud, when nobody else did.

"We can't change the numbers," he muttered. "So it doesn't matter. What does matter is your training, 'cause that's something we *can* change before tomorrow. So let's get going, alright? Both of you, let's see your stances."

Tommy tuned them out without really meaning to, his gaze unfocused as he stared at the closed doors. Primes, Quackity had been right, hadn't he? About everything. The Egg would pick them off one by one, and what could they do about it, but sit back and watch helplessly?

Ranboo's knuckles brushed against his own, and he gently laced his fingers between Tommy's own, squeezing tightly. It was enough to break Tommy out of his sorrowful trance, but did nothing to lift his mood. Regardless, Tommy couldn't have been more grateful for his friends as Tubbo did the same with his other hand.

Maybe they were completely and utterly screwed tomorrow. Maybe the odds were stacked against them, maybe they didn't stand a chance. Maybe they'd all get egged or die or meet some other horrible fate and never see each other again.

Tommy didn't consider himself religious, but Primes, if there really was a god out there, he was praying with every single cell of his body that they'd be okay.

He had to believe they would. He didn't know what he'd do without them.

Chapter End Notes

god its so refreshing to write niki again the testosterone in this fic is overwhelming sometimes

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